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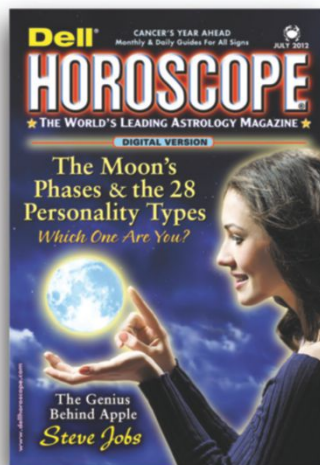
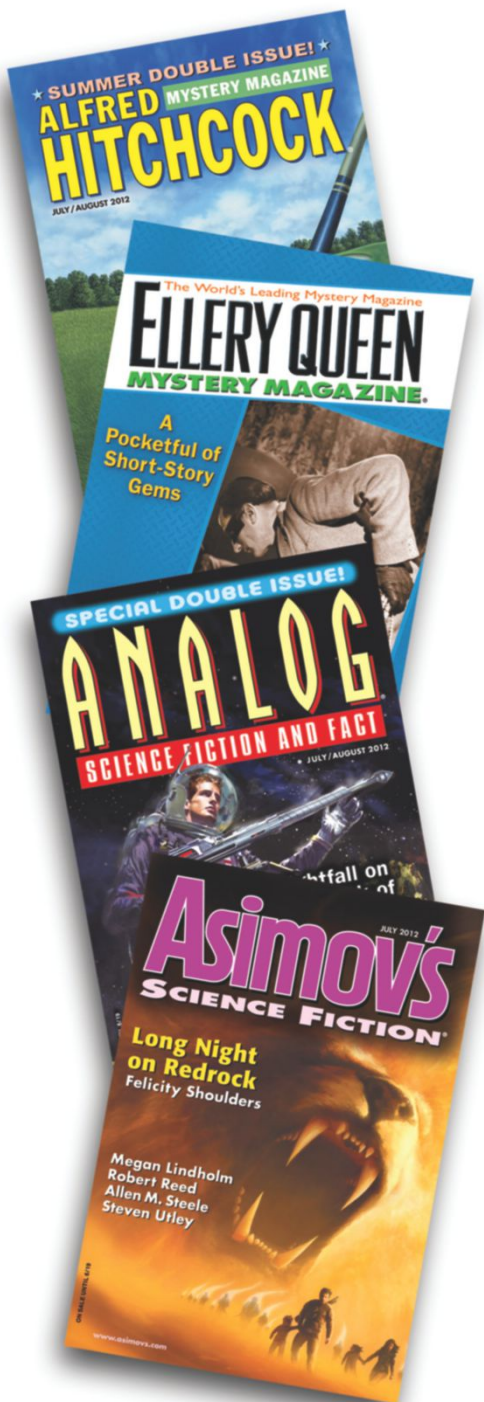
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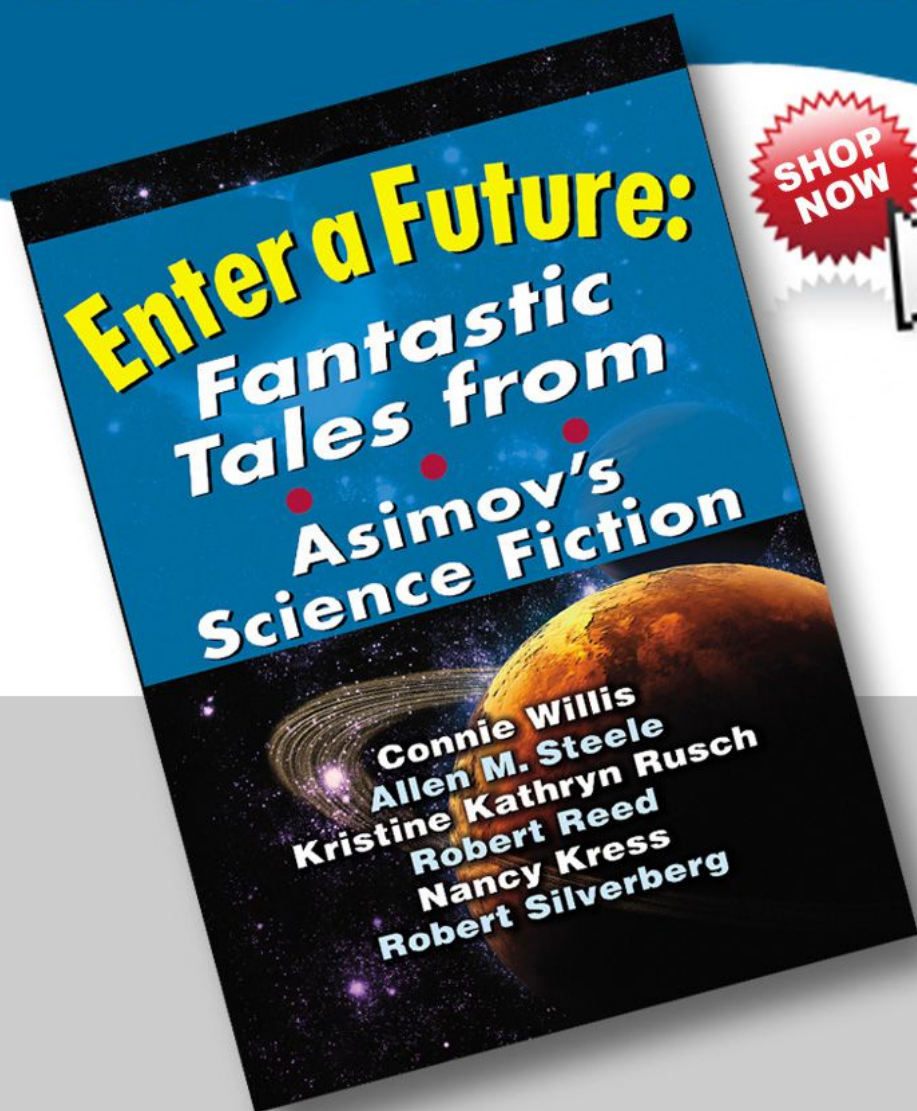
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## TRANSLATION ENIGMAS

I have been intrigued by the conundrum of how to puzzle out alien languages ever since reading H. Beam Piper's 1957 short story, "Omnilingual," as a teenager. Piper famously imagined that we could use the Periodical Table as a common Rosetta Stone to decode the language left behind by ancient Martians. *The Listeners* by James Gunn, a 1972 novel that is another favorite from my teens, was about how we would decipher messages received via Arecibo Observatory's radio telescopes in Puerto Rico. Jim's great insight was that aliens might use images instead of words to communicate with us over electromagnetic waves. Ruth Nestvold's 2003 novel, "Looking Through Lace," speculates that an alien culture might employ a mechanism like tatting for their written language. In all these tales, the key to understanding the alien language is just a little bit outside our comfort zone. All these methods derive from our shared experiences as human beings. We may not understand fictional aliens' communication system until we reach the end of their story, but once we get there, the answers seem pretty obvious. Much as I'd like to believe that all humanity needs to do is pack a universal translator when negotiating with aliens, I'm pretty sure that won't really be the case.

This summer, I was struck by just how difficult the reality might be while visiting Bletchley Park, the home of Britain's Government Code and Cypher School during the Second World War. I've long been fascinated by Germany's Enigma Machine and the Bombe, a machine developed by Alan Turing and Gordon Welchman (which improved on the pre-war Polish Bomba) to decode the Enigma messages as quickly as possible. According to the Bletchley Park Guidebook, "the standard

three-rotor Enigma was capable of being set to 159,000,000,000,000,000,000 possible combinations. . . . The settings were . . . different for the Army Air Force, Navy, and Secret Service, and most were changed daily." In *Demystifying the Bombe*, Demont Turing writes, "A successful run of a Bombe machine could reduce these large numbers to around a million possible settings in about twenty minutes." The Bombe was to a large extent a machine of "drums, which mimic the rotors in the Enigmas's scrambler unit" and cables that connected to mock Enigmas. Although all 211 Bombes were destroyed after the war, one can now see a recreated version of the noisy machine in action at Bletchley Park.

Yet, despite all the drums and the cables and the math and logic that went into the Bombe's creation, the codes were ultimately broken by very human "cribs." The machine looked for standard salutations, common phrases like "nothing to report," or numbers written in full. The cribs made it possible for the Bombe to test for an Enigma machine's rotors' starting position.

Neither the Bombe nor the human codebreakers who applied further decoding techniques to convert encoded messages into plain German could have gotten very far without these cribs. Much like Piper's use of the Periodical Table, it was a shared knowledge—this time familiarity with the Latin alphabet, an understanding of German, and an awareness of common word choices—that made deciphering possible.

On the other hand, even without the use of Enigma machines to encode messages, the lack of a shared knowledge made the Navajo code talkers work unbreakable in WW2's Pacific theater. According to the *New York Times* June 5,

2014, obituary for Chester Nez—the last of the original Navajo code talkers—the code “used two layers of encryption. The first layer was the Navajo language itself, known to be understood by only a handful of non-Navajos, none of them Japanese.” The code talkers also encrypted the alphabet by substituting Navajo words for Latin letters and “created a glossary of hundreds of words used in battlefield communication. While some were simply Navajo translations of their English counterparts, many others were poetic circumlocutions.”

The *Times* provided translations of some of these “poetic circumlocutions.” Terms like “ne-he-mah” (“our mother”) for “America,” “lo-tso” (“whale”) for “battleship,” “besh-lo” (“iron fish”) for “submarine,” and “ca-lo” (“shark”) for “destroyer” made perfect sense to me. With the right information, the Japanese would have understood these word choices, too.

I find it hard to believe that any alien method of communication will be as easy to decode as Navajo or as accessible as German idioms. If the occasion finally presents itself, there will probably be no shared experiences. Extraterrestrials may converse in infrared or in pheromones, or in something we haven’t even thought of. They might transmit their language at the speed of light or at the glacial pace of Roger Zelazny’s “Great Slow Kings.” They may perceive us, or we them, as akin to mayflies or Sequoias.

That doesn’t mean we should give up all hope of communicating with the alien. And it certainly doesn’t mean that authors should stop writing SF about alien languages. Science fiction illuminates human cultures from the past, the present, and the future, and sometimes it does so by looking at all manner of alien civilizations. Often, when we explore the alien, we get closer to an understanding of ourselves. And if we understand the human race, perhaps we actually will have a better shot at communicating with ETs when they finally show up. Plus, the entire endeavor is fun. After all, who hasn’t enjoyed that feeling of frisson once they come to understand Damon Knight’s famous “To Serve Man” is about a cookbook. ○

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## LOST IN TRANSLATION II

About fifteen years ago I did a column headed “Lost in Translation,” in which I discussed some of the problems of converting one language to another, noting, among other things, that if doing so is such a hard task on one small planet, how plausible is it going to be that we will ever develop handy translating devices that will let us communicate with the inhabitants of alien worlds? Since then I’ve had some further thoughts on the subject of translation, and here is a sequel to that first column, with some quotations from the original text in case you don’t happen to have the April 1999 issue of this magazine handy at the moment.

You can forget about that translating gizmo for alien languages. The ingenious writer who called himself Murray Leinster was, I think, the first to dream one of these things up, in his classic 1945 story “First Contact,” and it’s been a standard part of SF furniture ever since. (“We’ve hooked up some machinery,” said Tommy, “that amounts to a mechanical translator.”) After some plausible-sounding engineering talk about frequency modulation and short-wave beams, Tommy goes on to tell his captain, “We agreed on arbitrary symbols for objects, sir, and worked out relationships and verbs and so on with diagrams and pictures. We’ve a couple of thousand words that have mutual meanings. We set up an analyzer to sort out their short-wave groups, which we feed into a decoding machine. And then the coding end of the machine picks out recordings to make the wave groups we want to send back. When you’re ready to talk to the skipper of the other ship, sir, I think we’re ready.”)

But actually creating such a device would be easier said than done. It would take a very special kind of skill to be able to analyze the sounds of a previously

unknown alien language and make any sort of sense out of them; and the sense it might make is unlikely to be very sensible sense. Consider Kim Stanley Robinson’s 1990 story “The Translator,” which pokes lethal fun at the whole translating-machine concept: a hapless Earthman meeting with two alien species at once has one group tell him things like “*War-like viciously now descendant fat food flame death*” while the other comes through the translating gadget with sounds that can be translated, the machine says, as “*1. Fish market. 2. Fish harvest. 3. Sunspots visible from a depth of 10 meters below the surface of the ocean on a calm day. 4. Traditional festival. 5. Astrological configuration in galactic core.*”

It happens that my own work, like that of most well-known modern science fiction writers, is routinely translated into fifteen or twenty foreign languages: invariably French and German and Italian, often Spanish and Portuguese, and on and on, through Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Russian, Hebrew, and the various Scandinavian languages, to the occasional Thai, Korean, and Greek edition. Now, my style is reasonably straightforward and lucid; but I often wonder how closely the translated versions resemble what I’ve written.

Some of it must be pretty close. I’ve met many of my translators, and they speak English easily and well. They also are often willing to question me by mail or even telephone about words or passages in my books that they find obscure.

Even so, problems inevitably arise. I often wonder whether my foreign editions resemble in anything more than general outline the ones that I wrote. I can hardly expect the characteristic flavor of my style to be carried over into Bulgarian or Turkish or Czech; but what if small distortions



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DIARY OF A  
**ZOMBIE**

Sergi LLAUGER

"From the ashes of a devastated world,  
there arises a triumph that will change everything."

DEBOK

of meaning have crept in progressively, chapter by chapter, accumulating until, by the midway point, the story itself is incomprehensible? How could I tell? I am able to make myself understood fairly well in Italian and can manage, slowly, to cope with written French, but I don't pretend to be fluent in either language, and Bulgarian, Turkish, and Czech are beyond me entirely, so I have no way of judging the competence of a translation. Sometimes, when a new edition of one of my books is published, the overseas publisher tells me that it is being translated anew, because the earlier translation was badly done—but that's generally the first knowledge I have of that.

Translations pose all sorts of odd problems. Recently I've been reading a lot of the Maigret detective stories by the great Belgian novelist Georges Simenon. I've never been much of a detective-story fan, but Maigret is an interesting character, and Simenon's Maigret books provide a charming, moody portrait of low-life

Paris of the 1930s and 1940s that I find very appealing. So when I heard that Penguin Books was going to reissue the whole lengthy Maigret series in shiny new translations, I picked up the first of the new series, *Pietr the Latvian*, and read it right away.

The new translation turned out to be *too* shiny, though. *Pietr the Latvian* was first published in 1930; but very quickly I came upon references to "body language," "money-launderer," and "gourmet meals." Professional killers were spoken of as "hit-men." A gangster was described as the "capo" of a major crime ring. And a sleazy scheme was called a "scam."

All of these seemed anachronistic to me. "Body language," I was sure, was a phrase that went back only to the 1960s. Likewise "capo," a Mafia term, popularized by fairly recent American crime novels and movies. A gourmet, in France, is someone who has fine tastes in food; in modern American English, the term has become an adjective applied to the food

itself, as in “gourmet meals.” “Hit-man” is surely a phrase that came into our language in the last fifty years or so. Likewise “scam” and “money-launderer.” All of these, having come into use in English decades after publication of the original book, jolted me out of the illusion that I wanted the book to create. Simenon, of course, wrote in French, so the question is one of appropriate equivalence for the terms he used. Since *Pietr the Latvian* was written more than eighty-five years ago and is set in the world of that time, it seemed jarring to me to encounter these modern locutions in the translation. I checked an earlier translation, one that Penguin had published in 1963 as *Maigret and the Enigmatic Lett*. Indeed, the “gourmet meal” was simply a “delicious” meal. “Hit-men” were referred to only as “killers.” That “capo” was merely the “leader” of the gang. “Body language” was “gestures.” The gang’s “money-launderer” was merely its “treasurer.”

I’m not sure the translator can be faulted for introducing these terms, which to me are anachronistic but to a reader whose grounding in our language doesn’t happen to go back seventy-some years, as mine does, are perfectly untroublesome usage. The translator’s job is to make the translated work understood by the reader. Everybody knows what a hit-man is, or a scam, and few Americans are bothered by the use of “gourmet” as an adjective. If the translator had slipped references to cell phones or iPads into the text, or had had Maigret’s police lab use Photoshop on a picture, those would, of course, have been unacceptable transgressions. But in this case the only reader offended was one who was aware that certain phrases used were era-inappropriate for this book. It’s a delicate issue.

A recent translation of the *Histories* of Herodotus makes that chronicler of 2,500 years ago use the phrase “power-brokers,” where earlier translators spoke of “men who held power” or “leading men.” The lotus-eaters of North Africa “munch” the plant, but Herodotus simply said they “eat” it. And so forth. Sometimes a

translator goes too far out of the way to make a book comfortable for modern readers.

On the other hand, some translations can be incomprehensible if they follow the text too literally. Consider the adjective “cool,” which nowadays is a term of approval. “She’s really cool” can mean that a woman is highly attractive—but so can “She’s really hot,” semantically the direct opposite of the term. What is the translator to do? (Especially when “cool,” in an earlier sense of the word, can be taken to mean “indifferent,” “remote,” “chilly.”) And in his book, *Experiences in Translation*, Umberto Eco, the author of that fine medieval mystery story *The Name of the Rose*, cites a passage from one of his books in which the characters go for a drive and glimpse “boundless horizons beyond the hedge.” That is a reference to a nineteenth-century poem by Giacomo Leopardi, in which “beyond the hedge” is a metaphorical way of indicating an infinite vista. Most literate Italians know the poem, but hardly anyone else does; and so the English translator of the novel changed the line to read, “We glimpsed endless vistas. Like Darien . . .” The reference now is to Keats’ sonnet, *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer* (“Silent, upon a peak in Darien . . .”) He has provided, not a literal translation of Eco’s line, but a literary equivalent; but he did so with Eco’s approval: “I told my various translators that neither the hedge nor the allusion to Leopardi was important, but I insisted that a literary clue be kept at all costs.” Arguments could be made on both sides here. Eco’s translator manages to convey the meaning, what Eco calls the “deep” sense of his story, while rewriting his actual text, and Eco was pleased with the result. The Simenon translator maintained the “deep” meaning also, but at the cost of offending a reader who wanted what he was reading to preserve the flavor of the era in which the book had been written and in which it was set.

And then we have the case of the translator who vastly rewrites the original and

produces something that, while far from an accurate rendering, has literary value of its own. The classic example is Sir Thomas Urquhart's joyous, exuberant seventeenth-century translation of Francois Rabelais' sixteenth-century *Gargantua and Pantagruel*—a translation that is half again as long as the original! As though Rabelais' text were not rich enough, Urquhart uses it as the takeoff point for a wildly fantastic expansion—as in Chapter 25 of Book I, where a string of twenty-eight insults becomes forty with the addition of such purely English epithets as “slabberdegullion druggels” and “doddipol joltheads.” In Chapter 13 of Book III, a catalog of nature's noises disturbing the peace of a reclusive philosopher is amplified beyond “the baying of dogs” and “the yelping of wolves” to include dozens more: “the buzzing of dromedaries,” “the frantling of peacocks,” “the snuttering of monkeys,” and on and on and on. Is it a literal translation of Rabelais? Certainly not. Is it faithful to the spirit of his great work? Yes, indeed. Urquhart has produced something that is Rabelaisian without exactly being

Rabelais, a work that has given immense pleasure to many readers for three and a half centuries.

I seem to occupy all sides of this discussion on the art of translation. The anachronistic bits of contemporary terminology in the translation of Simenon's 1930 novel bother me. The vast expansion of Rabelais' text by Urquhart gets my enthusiastic applause. And Umberto Eco offers his approval of the substitution of a reference to an English poem for an Italian one in the translation of his own novel.

The purpose of a translation is to make a text available to readers who otherwise would have no access to it—a virtuous goal, one that has enriched the lives of all literate persons. But there appears to be no one criterion by which the merit of any particular translation can be judged. Some translations work, some don't, and the reasons are different in each case. I suppose we should simply be grateful that it is possible to convey the approximate meaning of words of one language in another, and let it go at that. ○



## CURATION, PLEASE!

gatekeepers

*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

**S**orry, but I couldn't help myself. I took two years of Latin in high school and it's been eons since I've made use of what little I remember of those drowsy afternoons in Miss Grant's class. The quotation above is usually attributed to the first century Roman satirist **Juvenal** <[newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Lessons-from-Juvenal-1755](http://newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Lessons-from-Juvenal-1755)>. Literally translated it means "Who will guard the guards themselves?" Over time it has come to point at the problem of overreaching power. Who will check those we put in positions of authority? Who keeps an eye on the cops? The President of the United States? For that matter, who is looking over Sheila Williams's shoulder?

Wait, *our* Sheila Williams?

Recall that Sheila is a member of the class of guardians we in the writing biz like to call editors (from the Latin *editus*, past participle of *edere*, to put forth, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Some liken editors to gatekeepers who guard the entrance to the Promised Land of Publication. I prefer to think of Sheila as a curator of the seemingly endless flood of manuscripts submitted to this magazine, selecting those few she deems best for your reading pleasure. (Curator, the *OED* tells us, derives from the Latin *curator*: overseer, guardian, agent.). Now, Sheila will be the first to tell you that there are wonderful stories that just do not appeal to her. Thus, if there is a check on the power of any one editor/gatekeeper, it is that there are other editors with different tastes editing many other publications. All of them are eager to see great stories in their inboxes and to publish as many of them as they can. And, as

we learned in several previous installments, **see here** <[asimovs.com/2013\\_03/onthenet.shtml](http://asimovs.com/2013_03/onthenet.shtml)> and **here** <[asimovs.com/2013\\_10-11/onthenet.shtml](http://asimovs.com/2013_10-11/onthenet.shtml)> and **here** <[asimovs.com/2013\\_12/onthenet.shtml](http://asimovs.com/2013_12/onthenet.shtml)>, what gives most editors the greatest pleasure is finding new talent.

And yet, there are those who once aspired to sell their stories to one of the genre's many magazines who have given up in the mistaken belief that SF publishing is a closed shop. They believe that editors like Sheila or Trevor Quachri over at **Analog** <[analogsf.com](http://analogsf.com)> or Neil Clarke at **Clarkesworld** <[clarkesworldmagazine.com](http://clarkesworldmagazine.com)> or John Joseph Adams at **Lightspeed** <[lightspeedmagazine.com](http://lightspeedmagazine.com)> have their own coteries of writers, so breaking in is pretty much impossible. This is so not true! Try checking out the webpage of the **John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer** <[writertopia.com/awards/Campbell](http://writertopia.com/awards/Campbell)> for proof. Nevertheless, some are leaving traditional publishing to join the revolution in self-publishing. There are certainly other reasons to self-publish besides the size of your stack of rejection slips. But are they enough to forsake traditional publishing altogether?

indie

If you are looking for a definitive answer, look elsewhere. The topsy-turvy landscape of contemporary publishing leaves me dizzy and not a little nauseous. But here are five things I think I know about the new self-publishing.

1) The term self-publication is inaccurate and has unfortunate connotations. This is not your grandpa's vanity publishing. Many who follow this path like to call themselves indie authors or indies. This invites confusion with the robust **small press** <[en.wikipedia.org/](http://en.wikipedia.org/)

wiki/Small\_press> or indie publishing sector of the business, so some sorting out needs to happen. Note that being an indie author does not necessarily mean you eschew all contact with traditional publishing.

2) Self-publishing can be a powerful tool for good in the right hands. It gives indies total control over the means of production of their content . . . er . . . stories. Corporate interests still dominate the means of distribution, but for the time being, the deal being offered by the likes of **Kindle Direct Publishing** <kdp.amazon.com> and **NOOK Press** <nook.press.com> and **Kobo Writing Life** <kobo.com/writinglife> is very attractive indeed.

3) With the barriers to digital publication falling, responsibility for the quality of the work rests entirely on the indie author. I see this as a mixed blessing. Either an indie must pay for the services she needs to transform a manuscript into a professional-quality ebook, or she must acquire the necessary skills to perform those services for herself. Either way, indie writers must budget for an expense of time or money or both. It is bad for everyone when anyone peddles shoddy goods. This reality takes some of the shine off the distribution deal. Nevertheless, the indie writer is her own boss in a way that no traditional writer is.

4) Promotional acumen is the survival skill for all writers. Traditional publishing does a great job of making books and zines but a mediocre job of selling them. Diffident writers who rely on their traditional publishers to promote the work are usually disappointed. Smart indies waste no time scrupling about whether to promote their own stories; they know they have to get it done or the work will be swept away in the terrifying flood of books and stories that spill from every distribution channel.

5) Vanishingly few writers of any persuasion, indie or traditional, earn a living wage. Just as for every mega-success like **George R.R. Martin** <georgerrmartin.com> there are thousands of aspiring, lightly published and traditionally published midlist writers who struggle to

make the rent, the vast majority of indies will never see even a tenth of phenom **Hugh Howey's** <hughhowey.com> yearly take-home. Having typed that, it's clear that we need to rethink what it means to be a professional writer in light of the indie phenomenon. For instance, if you sell three stories to *Asimov's*, the **Science Fiction Writers of America** will welcome you as an SF pro. Depending on the length of those stories, you might have earned between one thousand and fifteen hundred dollars. If you are knocking down three to four thousand dollars, year after year, selling your novels and stories on Amazon, you are making more than many of the "professionals" in SFWA.

Self-publishing is a tool that a writer can use or not as a career strategy. Many traditionally published authors are using this distribution channel to give their backlist a new life across a variety of digital platforms. I've had some success myself as a self-publisher. It's time to end the useless either/or debate between self and traditional publishing and embrace the change that is happening all around us.

#### curation

Now we've settled that, let's consider the challenge the new self-publishing has created for readers. That would be you, in case you're wondering. How do you, the literary consumer, find the best stories? Entrenched interests in traditional publishing would say, *no problem*. Just look for the stories that real editors have culled from their slush piles—your only guarantee of quality. Meanwhile, some indies would argue that stories that pass unmediated from author to reader are likely to be less constrained by commercial considerations and thus more audacious in style and content. These are both specious arguments, in my opinion. Yes, I happen to believe that the top stories in *Asimov's* are as good as science fiction gets, but there are many talented writers who have washed their hands of the traditional marketplace. Besides, in all things artistic, **Sturgeon's Law** <jessesword.com/sf/view/328> holds true. (Tired of defending science

fiction against literary types who claimed that 90 percent of genre fiction was crap, **Theodore Sturgeon** <[theodoresturgeon.trust.com](http://theodoresturgeon.trust.com)> riposted, “But 90 percent of everything is crap.”)

In an ideal world, where we were all immortal and lived in a post-scarcity utopia, there would be time enough for us to sample all new stories personally. But until that happy day arrives, we have to rely on curators to read and make recommendations for us. Sheila curates her submissions, and this magazine is the result. But after our editor has done her bit, other curators stand ready to help. **Locus** <[locusmag.com](http://locusmag.com)> has a staff of three astute short fiction reviewers, Gardner Dozois, Rich Horton, and Lois Tilton, who will point you toward some great reads. The controversial Dave Triesdale oversees an impressive staff at **Tangent Online** <[tangentonline.com](http://tangentonline.com)>, while solo reviewers Mark Watson at **Best SF** <[bestsf.net](http://bestsf.net)> and Sam Tomaino at **SF Revu** <[sfrevu.com](http://sfrevu.com)> are reliable guides. Then there are the Best of the Year anthologies, currently three. **The Year's Best Science Fiction** <[us.macmillan.com/books/9781250046215](http://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250046215)> is edited by Gardner Dozois, **The Year's Best Science Fiction & Fantasy** <[prime-books.com/shop/print-books/the-years-best-science-fiction-fantasy-2014-edited-by-rich-horton](http://prime-books.com/shop/print-books/the-years-best-science-fiction-fantasy-2014-edited-by-rich-horton)> is edited by Rich Horton, and **The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year** <[solarisbooks.com/titles/title\\_details/the\\_best\\_science\\_fiction\\_and\\_fantasy\\_of\\_the\\_year\\_volume\\_eight](http://solarisbooks.com/titles/title_details/the_best_science_fiction_and_fantasy_of_the_year_volume_eight)> is edited by Jonathan Strahan. And if that's not enough curating for you, consider browsing the shortlists of the three major genre awards, the **Hugo** <[thehugoawards.org](http://thehugoawards.org)>, the **Nebula** <[sfwa.org/nebula-awards](http://sfwa.org/nebula-awards)>, and the **Locus** <[locusmag.com/SFAwards/Db/Locus.html](http://locusmag.com/SFAwards/Db/Locus.html)> awards. (And while we're talking curation, a big shout out to Mark Kelly, who created and maintains the invaluable **Science Fiction Awards Database** <[sfadb.com](http://sfadb.com)>. Mark tracks winners and nominees of over a hundred different awards; you'd be hard pressed to find a more comprehensive reading list!)

\*\*\*

*exit*

The indies in the audience will have noticed by now that the list above is all about curation of traditional publishing. Who is curating the self-publishers?

And the answer is nobody I trust—yet. Excuse me if I am not swayed by the promotional efforts of savvy indie authors. You might get me to look at your page with an insightful blog post or a cool book trailer, but my reading time is way too limited to pick up your story without some kind of recommendation.

Customer reviews? According to **BrightLocal.com**, **79% Of Consumers Trust Online Reviews As Much As Personal Recommendations** <[searchengineland.com/2013-study-79-of-consumers-trust-online-reviews-as-much-as-personal-recommendations-164565](http://searchengineland.com/2013-study-79-of-consumers-trust-online-reviews-as-much-as-personal-recommendations-164565)>. I am not one of those consumers. Why? Click **The Best Book Reviews Money Can Buy** <[nytimes.com/2012/08/26/business/book-reviewers-for-hire-meet-a-demand-for-online-raves.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1](http://nytimes.com/2012/08/26/business/book-reviewers-for-hire-meet-a-demand-for-online-raves.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1)>, which details a literary entrepreneur's efforts to start his review-for-pay business. Experts estimate that as many as one third of all customer reviews may be fake.

Neither am I impressed by Amazon Best Sellers Rank. It's probably just me, but most best sellers on traditional publishing lists leave me cold.

So here's my modest proposal for self-publishing: we need some curation. I would love to see traditional publishing curators take an interest, and I believe we will see self-published stories routinely up for awards and in Year's Best volumes before too much longer. But until that happens, maybe the indie writer community should steer some of its promotional savvy toward creating its own curation infrastructure. Yes, I know the flaws of curation; after all, I've read Juvenal! Independent reviewers are not always dependable, and Best of Anything editors make subjective judgments, and awards are often flawed. There is, in fact, no perfect way to guard the guardians.

But without some kind of guidance, I just don't know where to start reading my indie colleagues! ○



# TUESDAYS

Suzanne Palmer

**Back while she was in college, Suzanne worked many odd jobs to make ends meet, from cashier at a fast-food Chinese restaurant to perforated paper edge-remover to overnight convenience-store clerk. There is something about the slow, grinding hours before dawn that draws out the most interesting (and sometimes most alarming) people, and there are endless stories to be found if you're brave or desperate or lucky enough to be out among them.**

3:36 A.M.: Kent / Paulson

**T**he police cruiser is just another set of headlights in the slow stream moving across the flat, featureless dark of an invisible highway, until it peels off from the shifting pack, growing brighter and larger as it leaves I-10 for the dusty off-ramp that serves the diner, an out-of-business gas station, and a vast unmarked wasteland of jackrabbit shit.

Even before it rolls to a gravel-crunching stop just at the edge of the bright neon light, the ambivalence of the two officers within is apparent. No flashing lights or sirens, no leaping out with guns drawn to confront the confrontable. Nor are they responding to a done-deal tragedy, another faceless out-of-stater whose attention has been slowly worn down by the monotony of the night road until their car unexpectedly intersects with one of the road's few, but surprisingly hittable, utility poles. There are no bodies, no official phone calls to be made. And at least—or perhaps at most—here there is coffee in plentiful and strong supply.

Officer Kent (young, not yet jaded, still thinking about criminals with anticipation) and Officer Paulson (older, less pleased about overnight shifts, the polyester content in the new uniform shirts, and the aging of his knees) get out of their cruiser, one on each side, and stand there looking over the parking lot, seeking advance warning on what waits inside:

- One tractor-trailer.
- A blue pickup that belongs to one of the diner's waitresses.
- A white Saab.
- A silver Honda sedan.

"Divide and conquer?" Kent asks.

"Just the basics, then we're out. This should take one cup of coffee at the most," Paulson answers, before his eyes find the black luxury tour bus parked off in the

shadows. It is undecorated except for a crucifix, on which is suspended a pair of men's briefs, painted on the rear. "Make that two cups."

"Do you think we should take notes?"

Paulson laughs, and it still has some warmth in it where bitterness has not eroded it away. "You sure should, 'cause I'm going to make you type the report anyway."

**3:42 A.M.: Mason**

"**Y**es, Officer, I was the one who called," the man says. "I must have panicked."

Kent is sitting across from the man, one elbow on the cracked formica tabletop, pen poised and waiting for him to say something worthwhile. For his part, the man is thinking he's not sure he *can*, not at this hour, not way out in this godforsaken dump in the middle of nowhere with nothing for company but the intermittent hum of traffic. They both know with fair certainty what is going through each other's minds.

"You seem fairly levelheaded now, Mr. . . ." Kent checks his notes so far. "Mr. Mason. Can you explain what happened?"

Mason sighs, putting his hands over his face and rubbing at his eyes, wishing he were sound asleep somewhere other than here. "I stopped off to use the restroom and get some coffee and a donut, for the road, when that lady started screaming." He points at the tall brunette leaning against the counter, her faux animal-print coat pulled tight around her, talking to Paulson.

**3:44 A.M.: Woods**

**T**he tall brunette is thinking: *I can see you, you jerk in your khaki pants and bald spot and little business tie pointing at me as you talk to the other cop, eyeing me like I'm trash, like this is somehow my doing.*

"And that was one 'r,' two 't's?" Paulson asks.

"Lo-RETT-Ah," she says, making each syllable a stab in the air between them. "Ain't that many different ways to spell it. Loretta Woods. Got it?" Her hands flutter near the pockets on her coat, that spastic body language of a smoker momentarily thwarted. *Just my luck*, she thinks, *I only peeled the Hello My Name Is sticker off my shirt a few hours ago. If I'd known I was going to be interrogated, I could have kept it on.*

**3:44 A.M.: Thompson**

**L**illy dries her hands on her apron, puts the newly cleaned pot up under the business end of the coffee maker, and having already set up the filter and grounds, starts it brewing. She can see there's going to be demand.

**3:44 A.M.: Mason**

"**S**he was out in the parking lot, and a bunch of us ran out to see what was wrong."

"And this was . . . ?" Kent taps his watch.

"Around three," Mason says. "I don't know exactly. Maybe a little before that."

"Who else went out?"

"That guy," Mason says, pointing again, this time at a man with a beer gut so large Kent wondered he didn't have to travel with a wheelbarrow to get himself around. Stains on his shirt, dirty jeans, baseball cap with the name of some other diner on it. The man hovered near the woman who'd screamed, who seemed to be giving Paulson attitude.

*Truck driver*, Kent thinks of the man, and the woman: *Hooker*. He's still new enough that that snap judgment seems unkind.

### 2:09 A.M.: Woods

**T**he white Saab pulls into the diner parking lot. The place had been a pinprick of light on the horizon, steadily growing closer, until it seemed like some sort of beckoning star. Now that she is here, she notes the dust-scored chrome, the 24-Hours sign in cheap neon, the interior a light blue that looks like it dates back to the fifties and has lived hard every year on its way to the present. She puts her face in her hands and cries in heaving, soundless sobs, the gentle ticking of her engine filling the hot night air, as she thinks in slowly tightening circles about the pervasive disappointment that is her life.

She hasn't decided if she's going in yet, or just leaving, or where she'll go, when the headlights appear behind her. She looks up through bleary eyes to see a giant black bus pull into the lot and park beside the diner. The bus is nearly as large as the little bright building, as if maybe next the diner itself could drive off and leave the bus in its place. The idea makes her smile. Wiping at her eyes, she checks her face in the mirror, does her best to hide the remnants of the breakdown written there, and decides that, at the very least, she should go into the diner for a pee.

### 3:47 A.M.: Mason

**"I** was heading for Las Cruces hoping to find a motel," Mason says, grateful for the officer's question and a chance to refocus his thoughts. "My mother's in a home in Pecos, and my brother called me to tell me she'd fallen and maybe broken a hip. I'm hoping to get there sometime later tomorrow—today, I guess. My brother's a good guy, but he—"

"Let's go back to the events here," Kent interrupts.

Mason takes a deep breath, thinks now about how he never did get his coffee. "She screamed, we ran out," he says. "They were looking up at the sky. So I looked up too, and there it was."

### 3:45 A.M.: Woods

**S**he's thinking, *he still keeps looking over here. He saw it too—but I bet he'll lie. People like him don't want anything to rock their cozy little world.*

*Bet he says it was a helicopter.*

"So tell me again, why did you go outside?" Paulson asks.

"Went out for a smoke," Loretta says. "Get some fresh air. You know?"

"You went by yourself?"

She shakes her head. "No. I was with Carl."

\* \* \*



3:58 A.M.: Fredricks

“It was un-fucking-believable,” the truck driver says for the fifth time in a row. *Doesn't matter*, he thinks, *it was*. “When that woman started screeching like it was the end of the world, I figured that rock-band guy was grabbing her ass or something, you know? But then I get out there, and it’s like, Holy shit! Big fucking thing, right here. Right *here*! Bet you guys wish you coulda seen it!”

“Can you describe it, Mr. Fredricks?” Paulson asks.

3:48 A.M.: Mason

“Can you describe it?” Kent asks.  
“Not really. It was really big. I mean, *big*.”

3:42 A.M.: Greene

Carl doesn’t notice the police cruiser at first, thinks it must not have been running its lights when it arrived. It’s only as he’s standing out by the front of the bus, talking to the driver about routes and traffic and times that he can see the officers clearly through the giant plate glass that makes up the entire front façade of the diner, talking to customers.

“Shit,” he says.

He goes back into the bus, rousts a few groggy-eyed roadies, and points them emphatically toward the bus’s small bathroom. AJ is sound asleep, doesn’t wake up to fairly insistent—almost violent—attempts to disturb him, so at last Carl just rolls him over, pats him down, and as soon as the roadies are done he goes into the bathroom and flushes down everything he found that he knows is bad, and some stuff he just plain doesn’t know what it is.

The roadies aren’t happy with him, but he thinks, *fuck them*. His job is to get them to the next gig, alive and not in jail, and everyone knows it.

Carl is ready by the time Paulson knocks on the bus door.

2:38 A.M.: Mason

He’s gripping the steering wheel of his Honda so hard there’s sweat under his fingers, thinking about his mother, wishing he was there already, not trusting Ed to do or say the right thing, stay on top of things, make sure Mom had what she needed.

He wishes he knew how bad the fall was. *What if . . . ?*

He pounds on the steering wheel with one hand, furious to the point of rage, rage at himself, for letting that thought sneak in there. Not: *What if Mother is dead?* but the damnable *If Mother is already dead, I won’t have to sit with her and watch her die*.

Oncoming headlights seem off until he realizes he’s drifted across the line. Jerking the wheel back onto his own side of the road, his heart pounds in his chest. *I need a break*, he thinks, and then he sees up ahead a lone light not moving, not a car.

*Please oh please*, he thinks, *let it be somewhere open, where there are people*.

\* \* \*

3:59 A.M.: Fredricks

**T**here weren't blinky lights, like in the movies," Fredricks says, "but it was big. Really fucking big."

Paulson holds up his pad so the truck driver can see he's already written down "BIG," and underlined it twice. "I've got 'big,'" he says. "Can you describe anything *else* about it, sir?"

12:01 A.M.: Thompson

**B**arb barely mumbles a goodbye on her way out, Linda already gone minutes ahead of her. Lilly is alone in the diner now except for Frank in the back, who is already sound asleep in his small office, bicycle in the doorway, feet up on his desk, papers spread across his wide chest as if somehow he can absorb the news. If it gets busy, she can wake him up to help her cook, but it won't get busy, never does, not until the distant early dregs of dawn begin to seep up over the far horizon.

The jukebox winds down into its own slumber, its final song played and no one feeding it more quarters. Lilly likes the sounds of the diner at night, doesn't miss the relentless, repetitive, muffled beat of the jukebox. There's plenty of pie left. Coffee is low, so she dumps out the last bit, boiled down nearly to tar, and carefully rinses out the glass carafe. Setting it upside-down to dry beside the sink, she gets a new filter out, a packet of pre-measured grounds, to wait on the counter beside her until headlights appear, if they do, and turn toward her. Then she'll have the coffee fresh, which is the only way it should ever be.

She looks up at the clock, and the free truck-parts-company calendar beside it. It's Tuesday. Eventually she won't be alone.

2:25 A.M.: Fredricks

**H**e's tired, sick of the road, sick of the junk food wrappers cluttering the seat beside him. He doesn't realize how thirsty he is, for something hot and bitter and full of caffeine, until he sees the diner in the distance up ahead. He's been here before: a quiet place, good coffee, no hassles.

He slows his rig, pulls off when the ramp finally appears out of the night ahead of him. At the diner he parks it facing out again, looking back at the endless road—some sort of perpetual penance for his sins—and hops down from the cab. His legs are stiff, aching, but he walks his rig, checks it over, checks the rear doors to make sure they're secure, throws a chock under a tire before he tucks in his shirt and heads into the diner for a brief respite from the drone of the asphalt.

3:48 A.M.: Mason

**I**t made noise, like . . . I don't know. Like pebbles rolling down a hill, maybe, a whole avalanche of pebbles, except *musical*. It was hard to hear, because that woman wouldn't stop screaming," Mason adds. "It wasn't there for very long, and then it was just gone, like in a blink. I know we're not that far off from White Sands, so I figure it's something of theirs. Better them than Roswell, right? Was that what it was?"

"I can't answer that, sir."

**3:46 A.M.: Woods**

**"W**ho's Carl?"

"The guy from the bus."

"Oh," Paulson says. "We'll be talking to him too."

*As if what, he's gonna say no, he didn't go out for a smoke with me?* The woman thinks. *This is such a crock of shit. I bet if I hadn't worn this stupid old coat, no one here'd be eyeballing me like I'm something filthy that crawled up out of a hole in the ground. I should have thrown it out years ago, but noooo, I had to hang onto it for the goddamned reunion.* She just wants to get out of the thing, put it in the first Salvation Army bin she passes so she'll never have to look at it in her closet again, never be reminded of how she's wasted the last twenty-five years.

She's passed wanting a smoke a long time ago, and now just wants a drink, or two, or five. "Are we done yet?" she asks.

"Can you describe what you saw?"

**4:01 A.M.: Fredricks**

**"I**t made a sound," the trucker says. "Like if you was humming the national anthem or something, but while chewing on ice cubes. That make any sense?"

"I'm sure I have no opinion, sir," Paulson says, though that's not even slightly true. "Was there anything else?"

"It took off real fast, just like that." Fredricks snaps his fingers. "Didn't land. Wouldn't that have been a hoot, a bunch of fucking aliens coming down for pie? But they didn't. I always wanted to see an alien. Did I mention how big the damned thing was?"

**3:50 A.M.: Mason**

**"T**he Roswell crack, that was a joke. I don't believe in that kind of thing, of course. Can I get some more coffee now?"

**4:02 A.M.: Fredricks**

**P**aulson closes his notebook, takes a deep breath. "I think we've got everything we can from you, Mr. Fredricks. I think you can go."

"If you don't think you need me. . . ."

"I'm sure."

"Well, okay then. You got my name and number, right? You'll call if you have questions? Or if you catch 'em or something or the Air Force shoots them down and they crash? I want to know if they're gonna crash, because that thing was *big*."

"We'll do our best, sir," Paulson says.

Fredricks adjusts his cap, shakes the officer's hand, and walks out. He can feel the eyes of the woman and the little nerdy guy who called 911 on his back, but when he glances over his shoulder the officers are looking at each other. *Glad to see the last of me*, he thinks. *Good. Aliens in the sky or not, I've got fourteen of 'em fresh over the*

*border from Juarez in the back of my truck waiting to get to Tucson, and last thing I need is to get held up so long the police get bored enough to search my trailer.*

He looks up at the sky, though, as he pulls the chock out from behind his tire and climbs up into his cab. *Damnedest thing.* The officer he'd talked to is just knocking on the door of the tour bus as he pulls out of the gravel parking lot and picks up speed to merge back onto the highway, more on his mind than he'd expected from a simple pit stop in the middle of nowhere.

#### 4:06 A.M.: Greene

**“O**fficer,” The man says, holding the bus door open but not moving out of the way.

“Are you Carl?” Paulson asks.

“I am.”

“Are you the driver?”

“I’m the manager.”

“Manager of?”

“The band.” At his look of incomprehension, Carl gestures back into the bus. “Actual Jesus and the Water-Walkers,” he says. “Have you heard of us?”

Paulson makes a face, realizes he is making a face, and does his best to stop. “Yeah, I have. What are you doing out here?”

“Stopped for a few hours so our driver could catch a nap,” Carl says. “We tend to pull off in out of the way places where we won’t be so noticeable. Fans, you know. Some of them can be a little crazy.”

“My son,” Paulson says, carefully, “brought home a DVD of some of your videos once.”

“It’s just business, you understand? Controversy sells. It’s not—”

“. . . Carl?” Someone calls groggily from the back. Paulson sees Carl wince, and waits with some curiosity as the caller stumbles forward toward the door.

#### 4:07 A.M.: Greene / “Actual Jesus”

**A**J stumbles toward the door, his blood-red knee-length shirt and the brocade vest on top of it both gaping wide open. No pants. No underwear. He pats his chest where his pocket would have been if his shirt had been buttoned. “Have you seen . . . ?”

He stops and stares at the officer, frozen in place if you don’t count swaying and twitching, his bloodshot eyes with their teeny tiny pupils wide open.

“You’ll have to pardon him,” Carl says, smoothly. “It’s been a long night on the road and he hasn’t had much sleep.”

“Not much sleep,” AJ echoes.

“He’s going back to bed now,” Carl says.

“Going back to bed now,” AJ says, and takes a step backward, stumbling against a seat.

“And he’s going to put his fucking pants back on,” Carl adds, with emphasis.

AJ flashes his manager the middle finger, then another to Paulson for good luck, takes another step backward and falls over.

“Why don’t I come out and talk?” Carl says.

“That seems for the best, sir,” Paulson says.

#### 3:49 A.M.: Woods

**“I** don’t know what I saw,” Loretta says. She’s too tired, doesn’t want to go straight

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from the middle-aged nobody in the zebra-stripe coat and too much makeup to the crazy woman who thinks she saw a UFO. No one else was going to be dumb enough to tell the truth, not to friends or family, much less to two bored police officers who probably got the night shift by being dirty cops.

She glances over at the guy who called the police in the first place, the officer he was talking to now done with him and moved on to the trucker, the too-skinny waitress with her cheap bleach-job hair in a fraying ponytail pouring him coffee, smiling, as if she could possibly care about anything in this isolated hellhole.

*No one tells the truth, she thinks.*

"It was probably a helicopter," she says at last. "A really big helicopter. Can I leave now?"

#### 4:09 A.M.: Greene

Carl steps out into the muggy night air and lets the bus door shut behind him.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Paulson asks. He's thinking about warrants, thinking about his name in the papers, thinking about how much time the bus occupants have already had to make sure he wouldn't find anything.

"As I said, we stopped here to let the driver catch some zees. I went in to get coffee for the crew, then I went back into the diner to talk to the woman in the zebra coat. At first I thought she was . . . well, you know. It's been a long tour. But she wasn't, and we had a nice talk, and we both wanted a smoke, so we stepped out. Talked for a bit, then there was this weird sound and we both looked up and there it was."

"What, sir?"

"The UFO."

"Ms. Woods expressed the opinion that it was a helicopter."

Carl laughs and shakes his head. "Yeah, I can believe that."

"That it was a helicopter?"

"Oh, no, just that she'd say that."

"And had you been drinking, prior to this incident?"

He laughs again. "I have six rock musicians, an equal number of groupies, four roadies, and a fucking tattooed squirrel monkey up on that bus," he says, "and it's my responsibility to keep them all together and able to put on a show. I don't do anything stronger than coffee while I'm on tour. The moment this tour's over, though, you can bet your ass I'm going to drink until I'm lying flat on the floor and hallucinating UFOs everywhere I look. But tonight, it was the real deal."

"Can you describe what it looked like?"

"It was big."

The officer sighs. "Other than big."

"It made a sound," Carl says.

"Can you describe it?"

"Ever put a harmonica in a blender?"

"No."

"Then no, I can't describe it," he says. "Will that be all?"

In the absence of probable cause, it is.

#### 4:28 A.M.: Kent

"Excuse me, Miss?" Kent has come back in, after watching Paulson talk to the bus people for a while, and feeling left out and bored.



Lilly has a damp cloth out and is cleaning the table where Kent had talked to Mason, who had finally slunk out of here not long after the trucker. "Name's Lilly," she says. "Three Ls, not all consecutive. Busy night tonight."

"Did you see anything?"

"The space ship." She picks up the salt shaker, twists the cap off, takes out a wadded up NutraSweet packet that someone had stuck in there sometime earlier, probably on Linda's shift.

"Did you go outside?"

"Naw, I could see it from the window," she says.

"Can you describe it at all?"

"Yeah," she says. "It's black. Hard to say how big it is because it's really big and in the dark you can't tell exactly how far up it is, but I'd say it's at least three or four hundred feet in diameter. No lights, although it does glow just a little bit, if that makes any sense. I figure it's probably just hot, maybe from going up and down through the atmosphere."

He stands, holding his pad, and blinks at her.

"I read," she adds, recognizing his expression. "Not much else to do out here. Usually dead at this time and I always get the overnight shifts because I'm the youngest. And I don't complain because I like them."

"Anything else notable about it?" Kent manages to ask.

"It makes sounds. Hard to describe," she says. "You have kids?"

"Me? No," he said.

"Married?"

"... No."

"Handsome guy like you? Now that's a shame."

"I have a nephew."

"He have any of those musical stuffed toys, you know the ones that sing?"

"Yeah."

"Ever run one through a dryer?"

"No."

"Well, try it. That's what the space ship sounds like. Kind of." She finishes cleaning the table and fetches a broom. He has to keep stepping out of the way as she sweeps, and he gets the feeling she's deliberately making him have to dance around away from the broom.

"How is it," he asks, finally, "that you didn't go outside, and yet you can describe it better than everyone else?"

"What's your name?" she asks.

"Officer Kent—"

"No, your first name."

Kent doesn't think he should answer, but after a pause, he does. "Matt," he says.

"Well, Matt," Lilly says. "I get bored here all by myself at night. If you want to come back next Tuesday and sit for a bit and chat, I'd be happy to explain all about it."

"I don't think I'm on duty next Tuesday."

She smiles. "It's okay, come on by anyway. Free coffee. Two A.M. Is it a date?"

"Uh ... I don't ..." he starts to say. *She's cute, but she sees UFOs*, he thinks. "I'd like to, but I don't think it'd be appropriate."

"Shame," Lilly says. She sweeps some crumbs off the counter, checks the coffee pot, puts on some more decaf. Then she pours him a cup, sets it in front of him, watches him trying to decide if he should drink it. Finally he picks it up, blows at the steam, takes a tentative sip.

"Cause the UFO comes by here every week at the same time," she says suddenly, and he spits coffee all down his own shirt.

She smiles, and thinks, *Tuesdays are looking up.* ○

# PAREIDOLIA

Kathleen Bartholomew

& Kage Baker

**Kathleen Bartholomew is the sister of the late Kage Baker, author of *The Company* series and numerous short stories appearing in *Asimov's*. With Kage, she grew up in Hollywood, California, and she was Kage's chauffeuse through all her adventures. Kage left Kathleen tons of notes, story ideas, and forty years of conversations about her stories—as well as a *geas* to complete the stories and keep them coming. Kathleen has so far finished a novel, *The Ladies of Nell Gwynne: On Land and at Sea* (Subteranen Press) and a short story for a posthumous collection *In The Company of Thieves* (Tachyon Publications). She also writes a blog, at [doctorzeus.co](http://doctorzeus.co), centered on Kage, life with and without her, and writing. "Pareidolia" revisits a character who was introduced in Kage Baker's first story, "Noble Mold" (*Asimov's*, October/November 1997).**

**I**t's amazing, the little details that get remembered by mortals in their histories. Most of the time, mortals are so busy rewriting the past for their own benefit that it's a miracle anything gets remembered at all. Then some weird little fact will show up millennia later, stubbornly imbedded in the latest scholarly fairytale, and ruin somebody's career.

Sorting this kind of thing out is my job. I work for Dr. Zeus Incorporated, a secret cabal of scientists and businessmen based in the twenty-third century. They invented time travel, you see, and one of the first results was the realization that literal tons of money could be had by looting the past for lost goodies. The second result, though, was a panic that somehow the past would get changed and they'd reverse-engineer themselves out of existence. So, they took on the responsibility of seeing that history more or less happened the way it should. Or at least the way it was recorded.

In order to follow both these agendas, they developed immortality via cyborged operatives; operatives who would walk through time at the normal rate but neither age nor die. Time's therefore full of immortal Company operatives babysitting priceless objects through the ages. Most are Preservers, who save stuff: lost manuscripts, extinct animals, legendary inventions. Facilitators, like me, handle those tricky jobs that help history stay on track: advising kings, founding schools of philosophy, preventing (or assuring) assassinations. . . . We all survive, trundling along like dung

beetles, rolling treasures uphill with us to the future. Also plastering over the cracks of tragic losses and damn fool mistakes, so that the future Company, Dr. Zeus, can eventually profit from the restoration of Mozart's Requiem or the Amir tiger. We make sure, when we have to, that history—the right history—happens.

Because, I gotta tell you, most people really work at obliterating what came before them. Mortals will casually eat entire species. Emperors want history to start with them, but even ordinary men will alter history to their own prejudices. There's always some busybody with a quill pen and a grudge ready to slander or deify the past.

It's not usually one of *us*, though. We're experts on low profiles. In fact, there's a whole department of the Company whose job it is to make sure the right obscure factoids get forgotten or remembered on time, so we're usually in there pitching for the "lost books of histories" team. You wouldn't believe where Mary Queen of Scots' casket letters ended up; though if you think about the description of her secretary Riccio . . . naw, I'm kidding on that one, just to show you how it can be done. I wasn't Riccio.

But I *was* Imhotep. And in the late twentieth century, a lady named Betty Rhodes spent a lot of time exercising the loose screw in her brain, trying to convince people that Imhotep and Joseph—the Bible guy with the many-colored coat, you know, the one sold into slavery by his brothers. Typical mortals!—were one and the same person. All based on a tiny reference in an ancient scroll that said Imhotep's real name was Joseph. . . .

I can't remember who I told that. Maybe my wife; even immortal Facilitators for Dr. Zeus, Inc. don't recall everything they say to their wives in the dark. I'm as prone to mumble something stupid while falling asleep as the next guy. I had a list of titles as long as your arm: Chancellor of the King of Egypt, Doctor, First In Line after the King of Upper Egypt, Administrator of the Great Palace, Hereditary Nobleman, High Priest of Heliopolis, Builder, Chief Carpenter, Head of the Royal Shipyards, Overseer of All Stoneworks, Chief Sculptor. Et cetera. And what gets remembered? That one night I told the wife, *Honey, call me Joseph*. Well, hey, I'm only human. Or was.

Besides, that was a minor lapse that never caused any real harm—a lot of crazier things got published in the late 1900s. No, what really came back to bite my butt was the damned engineering standards I gave to the Pharaoh Djoser.

### Heliopolis 2630 B.C.E. (approx.)

**"T**here aren't any uniform standards, O Pharaoh," I told Djoser. "Even the master masons are working off old tables their grandfathers drew up, or some invented 'trade secret' that no one else can interpret anyway. They're trying to build your tomb based on the length of Cousin Kasekh's forearm!"

"Our people have a great and proper reverence for the past," said Djoser. He sounded amused, even though he'd just been complaining about his newest statue—the one where his neck looked as long as his own arm, and made him pin-headed to boot. "They would rather use the proven wisdom of their ancestors than try something new."

"Well, we need a better reference system, somehow, O Son of the Sun. At least if you want a tomb that looks better than a termite mound. And it would be nice if your statues resembled one another, too."

I figured the statues would win him over. No one wants their portraits to leave the audience wondering what species the subject belonged to—and for the Pharaoh, the accuracy of his immortality was vital.

Djoser turned to look at me.

"We need a revelation, then, O Vase Builder in Chief," he said. "Can you provide me one?"

"Not I, Lord; but the gods will surely reveal something," I said piously. When he called me Vase Builder, it meant he was getting pissed. "I suggest I sleep at the construction site tonight, and see what the gods tell me in my dreams."

Djoser had known me long enough by now to tell that my "divine revelations" could be tailored to the needs of the throne with amazing specificity. Whether he thought I was a gifted prophet or just a gifted scam artist, I never knew—it made no difference. Maybe he really thought the gods were just hanging around waiting to pour solutions to his problems into my head.

"See it done, then." He deliberated a minute and added, "And inquire of the gods if they can reveal some rules about art, as well. Especially concerning proportions. The heads keep falling off."

I assured Pharaoh I would do so, and went off rubbing my hands together in glee. This was why I was there and then, working through an entire mortal lifetime to ensure the proper solutions to Classical Egypt's building problems.

This was one of the bigger revelations I was assigned to impart to the Third Dynasty—the engineering standards that would let them build the pyramids, beginning with the Step Pyramid for Djoser himself.

I'd even be able to add that labyrinth he'd been nagging me for.

So I hurried home and played with the kids while my wife packed me a dinner basket and a bedroll. A night picnic and a good sleep under the stars, and the statutes of government-sanctioned art could be firmly planted. And they'd keep Egyptian art and engineering on track for the next three thousand years. With a brief hiatus during Akhenaten's reign, of course. The sun worshipper went off on that short-lived experiment in monotheism and naturalistic art . . . but I'd be long gone by then, and my revealed truths of engineering would survive even him.

See, humans have a natural tendency toward pareidolia. That's seeing images—especially faces—in random patterns. It's why little kids draw houses with two windows on either side of a door, like a face. It's why babies will smile at a mask with seven or eight eyes but not at a mask with none: their brains are hardwired to expect Mommy to have at least two. It's all a recognition pattern that runs around in the fusiform gyrus and the parahippocampal gyrus. Conversely, you can make the brain see faces, and in fact interact with them, if you stimulate those same gyri. Examination of Egyptian art had showed the Company that, after a certain point, it was all designed to do just that. It's why the ancients reported that the gods came down off the walls and walked and talked in the old temples. But the Company couldn't find a place or time where the mathematical formulae were discovered, and they wanted to make sure the job got done—because a lot of the goodies they wanted to collect in the future depended on it.

It's one of their biggest corporate paranoia's—the horrible suspicion that they're now responsible for making sure history actually happens. . . .

The Company was going to great lengths to ensure that. And I did the job spectacularly well, if I say so myself. Heads stopped falling off royal statues and royal artists, and succeeding pyramids went up and stayed up. History was once more assured.

I packed my ceremonial kit myself—braziers, incense, pen and ink and blank papyrus—with which to record the proclamations of the gods on waking. At the bottom of it all was the "revelation" all prepared, complete with spurious divine seals and cartouches that would delight Djoser. That scroll would include the first rules and formulae for industrial government art. It had everything from reminders on how to calculate angles, to the perfect balance between the width of someone's eyebrows and the thickness of their lower lip.

With this in hand, Egyptian engineers would amaze the world. Egyptian priests would amaze their congregations. Egyptian artists would produce generations of

statues as alike as stamped cookies. And Egyptian gods would see into men's souls and walk beside them in the temple compounds. It had all been worked out to perfection by social psychiatrists and ad men in the Company's employ.

And someone due to be born in the twenty-third century would be able to indulge their hobby of Pharaonic art, and give Dr. Zeus the throne of the Twin Lands as payment for this carefully faked but genuinely ancient scroll.

Man, I love it when the threads all twist together!

By the time I left Imhotep's life behind, the "new art" and the engineering were a rip-roaring success. I stuck around long enough to make sure the Egyptians made the leap successfully from the Step Pyramid—which was basically just four or five mastaba tombs stacked on top of one another—to the more classic model—which was still a stack of mastabas, only with the gaps filled in.

The Pharaohs' statues were looking even more alike than the inbred Royal House. I went off to nudge the Sumerians into their assimilation by the Akkadians.

For the next twenty-five hundred years or so I wandered the Fertile Crescent. Mortals were inventing all sorts of weird governments and religions; my job was to make sure the right lunatics got into power. Most of it was pretty good—urban living was getting easier and easier to come by, and I'm a city boy at heart. Never mind that I was born in a cave in the Pyrenees; when I met indoor plumbing and wine shops, it was love at first sight.

Work as a Facilitator keeps you moving: things like getting grants and licenses for the Preservers posing as Hyperborean tourists who wanted to excavate Ubaid sites. (No easy trick when you're dealing with clay tablets and cuneiform.) Advising the odd king, turning the glass blowers and goldsmiths on to the latest one-thousand-year-old technology imported from Memphis . . . I think I personally spread cotter pins and faience through the Fertile Crescent, you know?

I worked my way north and east around the Mediterranean, did several stints in Rome as a soldier or a priest. Being in the Legions wasn't as bad as you'd think. Being a priest of Cybele was much worse—just because you can grow 'em back doesn't make dispensing with your testicles any more fun. But politics and religion are mainstays for Facilitators. I like to think it's because we have more of a sense of humor than the harder-wired Preservers.

The Company kept me busy, slotting me into the new Mediterranean societies just as Christianity began finding its feet among the civilized peoples of the world. Then when Rome began to fail, I started back down around the Golden Horn, headed for the next hotbed of Western Civilization: Constantinople.

### Constantinople, 535 C.E.

**S**ixth-century Constantinople was a pretty nice place to work.

As a Facilitator Class Operative for Dr. Zeus Inc., I've spent more time than I'd like on the front lines of power. That's a dangerous place. But I've got broader ethics parameters than a basic Preserver, plus some native, ah, flexibility, I guess you'd call it—basically, I'm a sneaky guy. And I need that edge, because on the edge is where I do my best work.

Christianity was having its growing pains, of course. I'd been working in the Greco-Roman mummy trade in Egypt, socking away the last of the embalmed gentry for Dr. Zeus as the Coptic Christians took more and more control of the mortuary



business—I was glad to get out of there before Islam arose in the next century and started eliminating the smaller Christian sects.

Anyway, nowhere did Christian sects cause so much uproar as in Constantinople! God's own gangsters. Crazy, too—the place was pretty much an open-air asylum for schisms, heresies, and the ever-popular wild-eyed prophet trade. Mix in the effect of being the Eastern Roman Empire, a melting pot of anybody who even *had* a melting point, and—well, the Golden Horn was a cornucopia for the Company. We had a huge staff there, operatives called in from all over the Middle East for the action.

The place was paradise for Company Preservers, of course, as Emperor Justinian ramped up his building and civic improvement programs. There were so many new buildings, that old gossip Procopius wrote an entire book called *Buildings of Justinian*, complaining about the high costs of government projects. There were about a dozen Preservers for every building, too, because Constantinople was one big grab bag.

I was running a freight service and a safe house, providing a base and guidance for my share of the projects going on. As the Preservers got their happy little obsessed hands around whatever Byzantine specialties turned them on, I shipped 'em out to wherever the Company had picked to hide said specialty until needed. I put it all in the safest keeping going, safe until that golden moment in Future Time when whoever had agreed to pay a fortune for it got around to being born. And since I packed along as much olive oil and cotton and saffron and honey and hashish as the mules could carry, the whole operation paid for itself. The Doctor really likes it when a Facilitator can make his base profitable on a local level.

I didn't even have to pick the destinations for what I shipped out, it all came pre-addressed. I had a score of good mules, a team of fake Levantine muleteers (all Security techs, enjoying running around being unshaven tough guys in the big city) and a positive budget balance with the Company accountants.

Now, *that's* Facilitating.

Things began to get hinky in 532, during the Nika Riots—it was always the racing clubs, the Blues or the Greens, behind crap like that; the sports cartels in the city were even worse than in Rome. Justinian had almost caved to their demands, or at least whatever their demands would have been. Those guys weren't too coherent at the best of times, and they were really only rioting because someone had tossed some twenty *nummi* coins into a crowd at the Hippodrome and yelled, "Bugger the Greens and Justinian too!"

Half the city burned, along with the basilica of Hagia Sophia, before Justinian sent in the Imperial guards and some hastily deputized Blues and took the rioters down. But then he started rebuilding the city, so everyone was reasonably happy again. It ended up as good press for him and his empress, Theodora. Especially when they announced they were rebuilding Hagia Sophia. For the third time.

Justinian indulged himself by hiring a couple of guys whose expertise was not in architecture or art—but mathematics. They drew up plans for a building made of stone, tile, glass and metal—advertised as noncombustible, which was a big selling point. Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles were the men of the hour, and the whole city was fascinated by the beautiful skeleton rising from the ashes of the old Sophia. When Anthemius died in 534, Isidore didn't even slow down. And when the stonemasons and sculptors and painters and mosaic-makers and fancy carpenters started in—well, it looked like a Golden Age was beginning on the Golden Horn.

But the Nika Riots were a reminder for us Operatives. Change was coming, bad change. Our Preservers were happy enough, scurrying around grabbing crumbs like art-obsessed ants, but they knew what was on the way. We all knew. The Plague of Justinian was due in just ten years. The Black Death would start its long reign over Europe.

Still—you know how it is. Everyone very carefully didn't dwell on it. I mean, we can't die, and we knew the plague was on the way, and we knew we had time to leave. In the long run, it had nothing to do with most of us.

In the meantime, I shipped out a lot of mules' worth of models and rough sketches and real Byzantine masterpieces replaced with durafoam copies in the middle of the night by anxious Preservers. Even with our pilfering, Hagia Sophia was turning out to be one of the loveliest buildings in the world.

Then Phil the Sicilian turned up with a new assignment.

I should have known that the fairy-godmother phase couldn't last—sooner or later, someone was bound to notice that old Joseph hadn't had a crisis in a couple of decades, and put my name back on the fecal roster.

As a matter of fact, I was supervising the loading of segments of red granite pillars from Ba'albek, imported from Lebanon under Justinian's orders for the church, when Phillip came to see me. Justinian had had them taken apart and shipped over in pieces like big checkers, the color of wet liver—you can see them in Hagia Sophia to this day, and you'll notice the pieces don't quite match. That's because we liberated half a dozen for an Ephesian church up in 2275. It struck me as pretty funny at the time.

Serves me right for laughing at religion. It's hard as hell to load a cylindrical object on to a curved mule back, and the mules don't help any. We were having some serious problems with geometry when one of my fake muleteers signaled from my compound gate.

*Hey, Joseph—broadcast Martin—got a Facilitator here, name's Phillip, got a message from Up Forward for you. (Image of a small brown man with an eye patch.)*

*Phillip? Phillip of Gela? Send him on back, Martin—*I answered. I was surprised, but only a little—Phil was a Facilitator who usually requested courier duties, and he was based in Sicily; as close to a local postman as we'd get here in the heart of Byzantium. And as I was uneasily considering this, I caught the two of them on my automatic scan, coming in from the front courtyard.

Phillip was a little guy (Hell, we were all little guys. Except the Security muleteers.) pretty much all one shade of caramel. The only thing of note about him was his heterochromia, which had originally gotten him recruited and rescued from the sacrificial pits of Ba'al. One eye was brown, the other was blue. In those days he usually wore an eye patch over the blue eye, to avoid alarming the mortals; though when he needed to play sorcerer (as we all did, from time to time) just taking off the patch was enough to get him all the street cred he needed. Today he was wearing it, plain soft leather in one more shade of brown.

"Good to see you, Joseph," he said, dropping his satchel on the ground. "The Blessing of the One on you and yours."

"May the Three reward you," I said automatically. That was Constantinople for you; the One or the Three and usually both. And usually a fight over it, too. "What have they sent you on this time?"

"Special orders for you, O favored son of small-time commerce," he said, and reached out—we clasped arms, Roman-style, and he set his free hand on my brow and downloaded what he was carrying.

I *hate* doing that. "Ow, damn it," I said. "How do I rate? Why not just send me my orders via credenza?"

The usual rush of details and images was already forcing its way out of my tertiary consciousness into my forebrain, with that *wonderful* feeling it always has of battery acid-laced bicarbonate of soda . . . and the first thing that cleared, I noted uneasily, was a big throbbing red PRIORITY SECURITY sign.

"Not for the likes of me to know," said Phil cheerfully. That confirmed the sinking feeling in my stomach. "I'm not supposed to know what you're doing, so don't tell me. I'm glad to be rid of it, though—that message got loaded in at Malta Base, and it's been making my corpus callosum itch all the way across the Med."

"My heart breaks for your damned corpus callosum," I snarled at him. I kicked his satchel. "So there's nothing important in there for me, huh?"

"Well, I may have a few bars of something dark and sweet. I came prepared as a bearer of bad news. Also, I need a bed for the night, and a ride in the direction of the Zagros range as soon as you can manage it," he said.

My head was beginning to fizz now. So I sent him off with Martin to the guest quarters in the main house. Phil was making himself popular with all and sundry by handing out chocolate bars as he went. He wasn't a bad guy, just glad it wasn't his turn in the barrel. I'd have felt the same way.

"What now, Boss?" asked Ivar. He was sitting on the barrel of granite we couldn't get on the mule.

I looked at it. It looked like a chunk of blood sausage, and maybe the bubbles in my brain kicked something into high gear.

"We need a hot dog bun," I said.

"Huh?"

"Build a big basket cradle, tie *that* to the mule, and put the damned pillar in the basket," I said.

I left the boys getting one of the resident Preservers to show them how to make a giant basket, and went off to let my new orders eat their way into my brain.

The best way to do that, in my experience, is to toss back a half-pint of chocolate milk and lie down for a while. This doesn't work well with ass's, goat's, ewe's, or mare's milk—and believe me, I've tried 'em all—so I'd taken to making it with cold water, Aztec style, until dairy industry caught up with the Mideast.

I had to get the cacao from Company bases, of course. But one of the big advantages of Constantinople was the Spice Market—you could get things to flavor your pease porridge that Africa and Europe only used to color paint. I liked spikenard, personally; reminds me of the way root beer will taste. Anyway, I knocked some back and lay down to get the briefing.

A young man's face cleared out of the general data cloud—sulky, wall-eyed, bad mustache—and the info beside it identified him as Nikephoros, an ikon painter. He lived here in Constantinople, working free-lance for Isidore of Melitus on Hagia Sophia. The Company wanted everything he'd produced on the assignment—any and all ikons he'd painted for use in the church. So, why was this Priority, and Secret? I'd shipped out literally tons of Byzantine art for the aesthetes and museums of the future; it was practically why I was here.

I went down to the next level. It wasn't for their artistic value, apparently. The report said that, according to reports from the work site, this guy's ikons were making people go crazy. I was to find out how and why, secure his whole *oeuvre*, and then make sure he couldn't paint any more.

That made my stomach hurt again. I never like assignments that imply wet work, and they can't be handed off to the Preservers. Their clean, specialized little brains would boil over . . . but, hey, the guy was a starving artist, right? That meant he was for sale.

I thought over what the local gossip mill was saying about Isidore's artists. There were dozens of ikon makers working for Isidore, and the ones that worked in paint were the least well-paid. The really expensive stuff was being done in gold-backed mosaic glass. Even the sculptors were getting the short end, since the Orthodox Church didn't approve of any sculpture more three-dimensional than a 3/4 profile fresco.

Anyway, this was Constantinople! I could bribe the guy to relocate and take up mural painting, or something.

Okay, message received, plan initiated, security guidelines adhered to, and I probably wouldn't have to have any of my muleteers whack a struggling religious artist. I finished off the xocolatl in my cup, and settled down for a nice, restorative nap.

Phil hung around for a few days while I got together a few mule loads of hashish and olive oil. Then I sent them all off with six of the boys to Goblecki Tepe to bury some relic he'd fetched from Malta. It'd be safe there for the next sixteen hundred years, he told me happily, and when it was found, it'd spark the beginnings of the Ephesian Movement.

"I'll make sure they can pay for all that red granite you're packing up, Joseph," he assured me, and went off singing lewd rounds with the Security guys.

Happy days, yeah. I do have to admit, it was a lot more fun to salt future digs with Classical art in those days. You felt like you were making a real difference.

Meanwhile I had an ikon painter to rob and terrorize.

Other than wondering how Nikephoros had pissed off Dr. Zeus, it was a fairly straightforward assignment. The guy made something artistic, with a weird reputation; we were sending stuff like that forward by the metric ton in those days. Maybe he'd welched on a prior deal with the Company—which was not only professional suicide, but often the real thing; Dr. Z. didn't like its sources knowing about the Company unless they were firmly under control.

There was nothing in the files, though. So I went hunting.

Nikephoros lived in one of the older, smaller streets off the Mese, more or less between the Harbor of Elutherios and the Cow Palace. It was a poor neighborhood—not much of a sea view, but a real amazing smell of fish. And when the wind changed, you got the fragrant breeze from the Forum Bovis. Smells of money, yeah, but not for the folks who lived down here where you could smell them.

I found his studio pretty easily. It was obviously an ex-pigeon coop built against the wall of an older house. Nobody answered hails at either door, and it just so happened that the courtyard was actually a blind pocket of a place framed by warehouses. It was easy to force the studio door and take a look inside.

It stank of stale pigeons, old eggs, and fresh turpentine, which is not one of the best smells of the exotic East. Except for the brushes in a cracked vase and several prepped wooden blanks for ikons, the place was a mess; he obviously worked in tempera and liked to gesture dramatically with a loaded brush. He might have beaten Pollack to the punch, if he hadn't been fourteen hundred years out of synch with the world of art. . . .

There were three finished ikons in sight. Nikephoros was good, I guess—but I'm no judge. To me, all ikons look like evil cartoons: the long narrow faces, bisected by long narrow noses; the huge darkened eyes, the pinched, feminine mouths . . . you know, they looked a lot like some sort of anime characters with really bad depression. But mortals have been crazy about them since they were first invented. And since Nikephoros was working for Isidore on Hagia Sophia, these mournful faces with their pointed chins and long hands posturing stiffly must be *well-done* evil cartoons, right?

They were still weird. But they sure as hell didn't affect me at all adversely, and none of my scans showed anything more dangerous than that Nikephoros was maybe using cheap turpentine and elderly eggs in his tempera paint. No Cromes Radiation, no psychotropic fumes, no hypnotic spirals to amaze your friends. No urge to go crazy.

So how were these horse-faced saints driving people nuts?

I took the three of them anyway, wrapped up in a length of muslin I also stole from him. With the mess in there, he'd never notice. He might not notice the missing ikons. They had no effect on the Security guys either.

I reported that I'd scored all the stock in the studio, but didn't get anything more enlightening from the credenza but an "Acknowledged" blip. The next stop would have to be the work site itself, where hopefully Nikephoros hadn't covered too much of the rising walls yet with his art.

I had no idea how I'd get them off if he had.

Next morning, I packed a wallet of salted figs and fresh mizithra cheese, and took a walk across the city to go gawk at Hagia Sophia.

My place was in the northeast of the city, near the base of the Fifth Hill, overlooking the Golden Horn. It was a pretty empty quarter then, but we were close to the Phanarion Gate in the Sea Wall, so my caravans could access the coast roads. There was a graveyard close by, which kept the passersby moving through quickly. And a graveyard is always handy for a quick stash. This one was going to be undisturbed until they built the Church of St. Mary of the Mongols on it, when it would then become the only church in Constantinople that never got converted to a mosque. That's just the sort of place the Company looks for.

On the inside of the Sea Wall, though, it was a pretty straight walk down the eastern edge of Constantinople toward the First Hill. Hagia Sophia was right there, west of the Acropolis and east of the Hippodrome. There was always a floating mob drifting around, and sidewalk superintendents could take in the show on the building site with no questions asked.

It was a chilly morning, with a steady wind coming off the Bosphorus. I'd added a round *paludamentum* cloak over my *tunica* before I left, and I wished I could have added leggings or trousers, too. But in fashionable circles, pants implied barbarism—and the mob that hung around the Hippodrome was as fashionable as they came. Stupid, aggressive, and dumb as a box of rocks, like sports fans anywhere and anywhen, but fashionable. I didn't want to draw any attention from the racing touts down there.

I needn't have worried. No one could have cared less about one more short dark guy in plain clothes. Everyone was either waiting anxiously for the first day's races, or strutting around to be seen themselves.

The damndest things repeat through human culture, you know? All these guys'd flip out automatically if they thought someone was looking at them funny. "Looking at me funny" has always been a great way to get stomped. It was hard to keep a straight face, though, if you'd been educated in culture-yet-to-be: the sports factions in Constantinople all wore their hair cropped short in front and in long tails at the back. So I'd see these deadly serious guys in their Byzantine mullets, and the unending human comedy was just hilarious. You've got to keep looking on the entertaining side of history, you know? Or this job will beat you down. . . .

Luckily, because of the Hippodrome crowd, there were always food and drink vendors down there. I got a cup of hot, spiced, sweetened wine—Constantinople was on a constant sugar high, they sweetened *everything*—and strolled over to the construction site.

They'd been at it for a couple of years. It was still a sea of mud with islands of random building materials, improvised straw matting paths between them (I saw the pile of red granite I'd pillaged for the Ephesians; still not being used), but the shape of the place was coming clear. That dome was gonna be a bitch . . . but at the moment, the workmen were all moving slowly, staring down at what would be the apse when it got a roof. A crowd of workers, and lookie-loos like me, was gathered on that edge.



They were all staring in and down. As I approached, I could see the guys in the back trying to leap up to peer over the shoulders in front of them. Just then, a weird choked howl broke out in the middle of the press, and everybody jumped back.

No one jumped further than me; I ended up on top of a stack of marble blocks. Down on the partially tiled floor, a guy in a porter's rough tunic was writhing around bleeding.

I mean, he was *fountaining* blood. He was bleeding from his eyes, but mostly from his nose—the sort where a cranial artery pops and you bleed out through your nasal passages. As I stared, he gave another of those bubbling howls, convulsed a last time, and was still.

Scanning, I could note all his life processes terminating in that sloppy, piecemeal way mortals die. I always hate seeing that. This guy's brain activity ran on for a few seconds after his heart stopped pumping, with an EEG that was definitely weird; a stroke? It read like he'd been hit by lightning, two different electrical patterns trying to take shape in microwaved brain tissue.

And standing there on the other side of the body was none other than wall-eyed young Nikephoros, with something square and flat wrapped up in his *chlamys*. His eyes were popping out of his head in opposite directions.

Another guy was coming at a dead run from inside the uncompleted apse—much better dressed, a *dalmatica* over a long *chiton*, and gilded leather shoes. He was carrying a big battered scroll that had to be a blueprint, waving it over his head like a battle axe.

My new orders identified him as Isidore. They hadn't mentioned his homicidal tendencies, though, so I was sort of surprised when he tried to brain poor Nikephoros with the scroll.

"What have you done now?" he shrieked. "Which one of them have you traduced to evil this time?"

He swung again. Nikephoris ducked desperately, duck-walked up the hem of his own cloak and went flat on his arse beside the dead man. The thing wrapped in his arms flew out and landed face up in front of the fascinated crowd.

And, I swear, they all screamed like little girls and took off! One minute they were as rapt as any bunch of loiterers who's just seen an entertaining industrial accident—the next they were leaping through the construction site like gazelles, trailed by oaths to the One and the Three. Half the workmen went with them, too.

I was still on my marble perch. I looked down—surprise, there was an ikon on the ground in front of me, which Isidore was avoiding like the coming plague. I could see the figure on it was holding a brick, had a bishop's crown and one eye bleeding copiously—probably St. Spyridon, who'd lost his eye to persecution, and was the patron of workers in clay.

I couldn't see how it had given the dead workman that brain-burn. But sure as five loaves and a pair of fishes, this was what the Company report was talking about.

With everybody left on the building site hovering around with eyes averted, no one was making any effort at picking up either the ikon or the stiff. I jumped down, slung off my *paludamentum* and covered the dead guy up. When I turned to the ikon, though, both Isidore and Nikephoros screeched like a pair of geese. So did some of the other workmen still hanging back around the beginnings of the apse.

*Don't look at it* was the gist of their yelling. I turned and let everyone see me make a big deal about putting my hand over one eye, and then picked the thing up.

An ikon; big surprise. And yeah, it was Spyridon, with his gouged-out eye resting on top of his brick. It was pretty well done, too—better than the ones I'd stolen from Nikephoros' studio. There was a complicated pattern on the edges of the Saint's robe, and it was repeated in miniature in the pupils of both staring eyes—which certainly

drew the gaze to them. It was a big fat blank as far as high weirdness was concerned, though: no radiation, no death rays shooting from either of Spyridon's eyes. On impulse, I peeked through the fingers of my shielding hand.

I couldn't exactly meet the saint's split level gaze, but with both my eyes on both of his, I felt—a tingle. A funny syncopated ripple in my cerebellum, a kind of drumbeat sensation at the left side of my brain. . . .

Our brains are protected in ways a mortal's brain couldn't even begin to sustain—training, implants, augmentations; and in the case of an Operative as old I was (just over twenty thousand years old that spring, thank you very much) millennia of practice in using an organ far removed from standard mortal issue. But best of all, our brains are enclosed in tiny, private Time Transcendence fields—each one of us is permanently a nanosecond out of synch with entropic time.

It's meant to keep out things like rocks and axes. It also protects from less tangible forces. I could feel *something* trying to coax my alpha waves to change their rhythm, but it wasn't working.

I looked up at my immediate audience and shrugged.

"It looks fine to me. Not even scratched, see?" and I held it out to Isidore.

He yelled and threw his hands over his face. Nikephoros—who couldn't have looked straight at anything if his life depended on it—scrambled up and snatched the ikon away from me. Once it was stashed away in the folds of his *chlamys* again, both of them stood staring at me.

"Are you—all right?" asked Isidore cautiously. He used that universal tone of voice that always means they expect you to scream and fall down dead . . . but I couldn't even feel that tingle now, not with the ikon hidden. "You must be wearing some charm to protect you from that poisonous thing's Medusa-gaze!"

He *expected* it to kill people? Neat.

"I told you, *Kupios*, it's only dangerous to evil men," pleaded Nikephoros.

He turned the ikon to face himself and stared desperately at it. "See? Nothing happens to me!"

I don't know if Isidore was thinking about that wall-eyed stare, or had just had enough of the artist and his work. He sure wasn't impressed it didn't kill Nikephoros, though, and managed to land a good whack with his scroll on the back of Nikephoros' head.

"It's not our place to put art on the walls of the basilica that kills men!" he told Nikephoros. "The ikon of the Christ you painted has driven three men into fits, and Alexander the grouter is still seeing visions! Now this one has burst Georgios' brains! Take that thing and get out of here—and don't come back until you're prepared to take the other one down and away with you as well!"

"But I only did what you told me to do—" Nikephoros skipped back hastily as Isidore took aim at his head, and ran off for the street.

Isidore stood panting, glaring after Nikephoros until the kid had run out of view. Then he waved his arms at the workmen still left on site.

"You! Cyrius, Aemilian, come take this poor man's body to his wife. The rest of you, get back to work!"

One of the men coming forward made to give me back my cloak, but I told him to keep it wrapped round the body—poor Mrs. Georgios was going to get a bad enough shock just seeing her hubby carried home dead, let alone bare and bloody. One of the other workers sidled up to Isidore.

"Um—*Kupios*, the other one is still up there in the corner," he mumbled. He wrung his hands. "We're afraid to go back over there—who knows if the ikon will decide one of us is a sinner?"

"You're all sinners, not that the ikons can tell," Isidore said in disgust. "That wretched Nikephoros has done something to them, something . . . it's *acheiropoieta*. . . ."

The word he used meant *not made by hand*, and he wasn't talking about mass production. He meant magic, or as much of it as a devout mathematician in Constantinople was prepared to believe in. It meant the ikon had a quality, an inborn quality, that wasn't the result of the work of man. Something divine, something dangerous. I gotta admit, I was inclined to agree with him.

"*Kupios*?" I stepped back into the fray. "I do have a charm that protects me. Let me remove this other ikon from your work, and I'll return it to the artist. It'll be an act of virtue, which all men need."

Isidore's face lit up, but he wasn't going to look stupid in front of his men. "What charm, how does it work?" he demanded.

I pulled out the medal of Luke I was wearing in those days and showed him.

"Patron of painters. Might do it," he allowed.

"Also," I said on impulse, "I am blind in my left eye."

If Isidore could tell any difference between my eyes, he had magic talents of his own. But he stared good and hard at each of them, and then nodded.

"On your own head be it," he said and turned away.

So the workmen led me under the partially completed dome, where the niches that would hold lesser altars were going in. Up in the groin of one was a nicely done ikon of Christ of the Sacred Heart, holding up his hand in benediction. The guy with me pointed the painting out while hiding from its line of sight behind a half-completed pillar.

I snagged a ladder and retrieved the ikon. Again, it was a better one than those I'd stolen the night before, but I was careful not to meet its gaze until I got down to the floor with it. A brief glimpse started up that syncopated feeling again on the left side of my skull, so I prudently held the Incarnate Lord facedown against my chest as I walked out.

There were looks of relief (and disappointment—the ikon's last victim had been a heck of a show) and a weak cheer when I walked out. Isidore came up to meet me, a burlap sack in his hands.

"Here, here, put the thing out of sight!" he ordered. He squinched his eyes shut while I put the ikon in the bag, and then handed the whole thing to me with obvious relief. I tucked it under my arm.

"Take it to that idiot Nikephoros," he ordered, as we started walking to the street. He handed me a small leather bag. "And take this; there's six solidii in there, for your act of faith, I insist."

Now, that was a nice return for taking away something I needed to acquire anyway. I put it in my pouch with no argument.

"What is your name, and your business?" he asked, walking me to the edge of the site. He really wanted to see the back of me and that ikon.

"Name's Josephus, *Kupios*. I have a caravan business over by the Fifth Hill," I said.

"And are you a Chalcedonian?" he asked.

He didn't mean the old country, he meant a Chalcedonian Christian. And since it was the sect that the Emperor Justinian currently favored, I assured him I was.

"For this favor, then, I will have your name etched under the door jamb of that niche you cleared for us," he said earnestly.

Now *that*, given the custom of the country and the time, was a damned nice thing to do; better than the cash, to most men. I'd accrue all sorts of spiritual benefits until Hagia Sophia burned again, with my name there. If I'd actually been a Chalcedonian Christian, at least. So I thanked him nicely, and went on my way.

The first curious bystander stepped into my path from behind a wine vendor's cart before I got ten feet off the building site. The wide green vertical stripe on his cloak made his politics plain. So did his balloon sleeves and bushy beard—Mother Nature had already moved his hairline back to his ears for him, though.

"Hey there, what'd you see? What you got in the bag, huh? "

"Is it one of the cursed ikons?" came a second eager voice from behind me. Other concerned bystanders chimed right in.

"Let's see!"

"Make Cadmus look, he's already cross-eyed!"

"Is that it in the bag?"

My proximity alarms were twitching like massed aneurysms in my vestibular system. A hand plucked at my shoulder, and I could feel the heat of the crowd coming up far too close behind me. . . .

I turned—slow, but with my elbows out, so neither of my new buddies could get a hand on the bag. Yeah, there was a good-sized group just beginning to seethe there in the street. I grinned at all of them, and held the bag out.

"Who's brave and stupid?" I roared suddenly, and let the mouth of the bag flop open in a quick brief flash of red and gold.

Sure enough, that moved them! There were a few more girly screams, and it looked like the front men levitated about a yard backward. There was a decent crowd here now, and all of them wore some Green stripe or ribbon or stamped design on their cloaks. Crowded together as they were, they were basically a baby mob. But they were intrigued and nervous, and I had their full attention.

"All right, citizens, you saw that poor bugger die over there!" I waved my free arm down the street, where the late Georgios was being carried away in my bloodied cloak. "I don't know what this thing does, but the esteemed Isidore is sending it back to its maker so no one else gets hurt. So just let me get on with my work, eh?"

"What makes you so special?" someone called (from well behind another bystander, I noted).

I pulled out the medal of Luke again. "I'm under the protection of the Evangelist Luke." I pitched my voice to carry to the back of the crowd. "And I'm blind in one eye. And my mother had me blessed at birth against any enchantment of vision. And I'm buying a drink for everybody here!"

I pulled out one of the solidii—gold ones, too; Isidore played fair—and tossed it to the wine vendor at the edge of the crowd. He plucked it out of the air, yelling with delight, and began calling out, "Wine! Red and white, honeyed or resined, *first cup free!*"

I walked away with great dignity and long strides as the crowd availed themselves of my generosity.

I had to get that second ikon, and I knew where Nikephoros lived. . . .

So there I was, striding along through the streets of Constantinople with revealed truth under my arm. And there was something ringing small, insistent alarms in the back of my mind. Not a hunch—this was the kind of neuron static only an Operative can feel, where some deeply buried security program has reached a conclusion your conscious mind missed, and is raising hell about it. Like a red light flashing in the corner of the screen, if that red light also made an annoying noise and smelled bad.

Near the Cow Palace I just couldn't take it any more. The addition of the smells from massed cattle to the uproar at the back of my mind was starting to make me seriously sick to my stomach. I sat down on the edge of a tiny municipal fountain, opened the bag and took a good long look at the ikon.

It was a pretty standard Christos—one long hand raised to draw attention to the complicated gilt and crimson pattern on his chest. That looked like a medal from the Fredonian army, but it was obviously meant to be the Sacred Heart. There was a pattern painted all tiny in the figure's sad black eyes, matching a complex ball of flame in Christ's other hand, and I could feel the imbedded pattern trying to convince me that the heart and eyes of Christ were fixed on me from everywhere. . . .

Yeah, this was definitely the source of my unease: the bells and whistles went frantic at the sight of it. That left-brain buzzing started up again, too. But there was nothing apparently insanity-producing, unless people had been losing their minds from the sheer persistence of the thing . . . but everyone else was a mortal. They weren't hearing what I could hear—and they might well be seeing something my cyborged eyes were filtering out. . . .

There are ways of turning our augmented sensorium down, to approximate mortal input. There's seldom any use for it, and it actually counts as a minor hazard in most circumstances. However, every baby operative learns how to do it, from the older kids. Get enough children together, and they'll generate stupid, dangerous games as naturally as sweat. Wandering around seeing everything in UV or out of focus or upside down can be pretty funny when you're eleven years old.

In this case, it might show me what the mortals were seeing.

I tried turning the UV and IR filters on and off: Nothing, although the colors changed interestingly. There was a very slight heat being generated—but it was the continuing decay of bad tempera paint, not radioactivity. The thing didn't glow in any range of the spectrum.

Next I tried the focus. Sharpening—no good, no mortal could see that clearly. Fuzzing it out felt promising, though—the bubbling feeling kicked up a notch. And something was stirring *waaay* down in my memory . . . when I had my vision dialed down so far Christ looked like a Mondrian painting, a word suddenly burst into my immediate consciousness: bright red, wreathed in flames and cherubs and smelling of mushrooms and the mud of the Nile: PAREIDOLIS.

What the fuck? I wondered. And then it all came together and my unconscious stopped screwing around with euphemisms, and I remembered where I'd encountered this before—the method of making a perfect image, to literally enthrall the viewer. To make them see patterns everywhere, especially patterns encoded in sculpture or paintings using the elements of mathematical proportions.

Djoser. Djoser and the damned formulae for perfect squares. And shoulders. And noses. And especially *eyes*.

That ball of multicolored fire in Christ's hand; an aspect of his divinity? The Holy Ghost? Hell, maybe it was a magic mushroom. But the flames caught the eye of the beholder, and at once started to actually *writhe*; the pupils of his elongated eyes did the same thing, in their separate settings. And when I wrenched my own eyes away and looked out at the wall beside me—Christ's face and burning eyes leaped out at me from every constellation of cracks in the plaster.

I looked down—yep, Christ again, his face forming in the swirls of dust in the street. Even the colors in his eyes showed, the repeating, twisting pattern of the flames. I could pick it out in the weave of my tunic hem. I could find it in the detail carving on the rim of the fountain bowl. I turned and looked over at the nearest cattle pen by the Forum Bovis.

The Son of Man and his psychedelic eyes were framed in every matted coat. Divine cowlicks!

There was no telling how Nikephoros had done it, not just from the ikons. I had to go find him and get the information out of him. If he'd somehow reinvented this, I'd have to wipe the memory out of his mind—which might take his skills at painting with it, but orders are orders, and it would be better than bashing his head in. But if he'd gotten the formulae from somewhere else, I had to find them and confiscate them.

There are times and places when you want religious art to literally talk to people. Constantinople on the brink of bubonic plague probably wasn't one of them.

I could feel it, the pattern recognition bug, trying to seize a permanent place in my brain. Pointless, of course, but it couldn't know that. The whole damned trick was just



based on the proportions of the ikon, steered by the colors and shapes Nikephoros had chosen. The ones he'd chosen for the Sacred Heart of Christ apparently sent you on a very bad trip.

I took off running for Nikephoros' pigeon coop of wonders.

He was home. He'd just been thrown off the construction site, blamed for the death of a workman; where else would he be? In fact, I found him in his studio, sitting hunched on a bench and staring at a rectangular object swathed in burlap. He didn't react when I came storming in.

"So, Nikephoros, what does that one do?" I asked him, and then stepped up to twitch the cloth off it.

"Don't look at it!" he yelled—sounded authentically scared, too. I looked at him—then turned to take a good long look at the ikon.

Same effect as before, same effect as the image of Christ: but not compassionate. This felt more—*aggressive*. Spyridon was glaring outrage at the viewer. Not a happy martyr, apparently. I felt simultaneously guilty and paranoid about attack. My blood pressure wanted to rise, my adrenal glands were trying to go into overdrive. Instant aneurysm! It'd be an easy thing for these reactions, superimposed on the natural rhythms of a mortal's brain, to raise the blood pressure enough for a blood vessel to pop.

"Never mind, I can tell what it does. But it won't hurt me, Nicky, so calm down." I put my ikon on the shelf next to it. Yeah, the eyes of God *and* amorphous shapes of horror and guilt, all prying together at the armor of my mind. Lovecraft would have liked it: just before he flipped out.

I sat down next to Nikephoros. He was staring at me, obviously sure I was about to go bonkers right in front of him.

"It doesn't affect me," I told him again. "Or you, obviously. So why doesn't it send *you* crazy?"

"I—I think I have a dispensation, because I painted them," he said shakily. He looked at me—and, at the same time, the ikons.

"I don't think so, Nicky. I think it's because you're incredibly wall-eyed," I said. "Can you even see out of both eyes at the same time?"

He scowled. "*No*, but I *can* see out of both of them. Just not together. I just tilt my head. Look at those!" He pointed at the ikons. "They're perfect! I can see just fine to paint!"

"Where'd you get the formulae?" I asked. "For the designs?"

He got a shifty look on his face. Ever seen someone like him look shifty? Very disturbing . . . I could tell from his biometrics he was about to tell a great big whopping lie, so I stepped in with a suggestion first: for the good of his soul, as it were.

"It was from Isidore, wasn't it? An old scroll, or some codex?" I took off the big bronze penannular pin I wore on my shoulder. "Don't lie to me, now. Your mouth may say No, but your heart rate says *Yes, yes*. So does your brain activity. In fact, your whole metabolism is interesting, because the ikons are trying hard to screw up your mind, and I want to see why it doesn't work on you."

Yeah, I pretty much dropped character completely there, but it was clear I was going to have to play some dirty tricks on Nikephoros' memories anyway. I didn't have time for my usual brilliant performance as a local.

"He gave me an old scroll. I did exactly what it said to do, too! It was full of mathematics, and models of angles. I had to use measuring cords and map pins, but—they were perfect!" Nikephoros was sounding less frightened now, and more sure of himself. He was sure he'd been screwed over somehow, anyway; and I really had to agree with him.

"Why did he want you to do it that way?" I pulled apart the pin shaft on my brooch—now it had a bronze point on one end and a silver needle on the other. I took a little silver ball out of my belt pouch, too, and pushed the bronze point into a tiny dimple on the ball. "Did he tell you what would happen?"

"He said they'd be inspiring. He said no one could resist them. That was all," Nikephoros said. "I could see they were good—the composition was perfect, I was proud of them! But then, when the other men saw them . . . they started to go mad, and Vasilikos *died!*"

"Just like Georgios. Tell me where the scroll is, Nicky."

He started to cry, but pointed to the cabinet the ikons were sitting on. Poor bugger. I was going to be doing him a favor by erasing this crap in his mind. It might save his reputation, or even his life. In the meantime . . .

"You did feel something, though, Nicky, didn't you?" I scanned him. The proof was there in his brain, a lot clearer than in my own, since his was an original model.

Even with his monocular vision, the program was trying to insert itself. The fusiform gyrus and the parahippocampal gyrus were both showing spikes of activity—they didn't match, as they would in someone with normal vision, but they must have been giving him a hell of a headache.

"The ikons are trying to set up a standing wave in your fusiform gyrus," I told him. "They're trying to set you up with some nice pareidolic hallucinations. Visions. Faces in the patterns on the walls."

"I don't understand any of that," he said, staring at me with his right eye. "But I don't have any visions. Did I kill Vasilikos and Georgios?"

"No, you just did your job too well," I said. "They had visions, and the visions wouldn't stop, and some of them were pretty scary. Spyridon, for instance. Those guys died of fright, more or less, because of the way they saw the ikons."

"I felt a little of that," Nikephoros whispered. "I finished another one. The Empress Augusta Pulcheria. But I was afraid to show her to anyone."

"Why, what does she do?"

Nikephoros actually blushed, and I was hit with such a wave of hormones that I was pretty sure I could guess what had happened.

"Overdid it on the 'pulcheria,' huh?"

He nodded miserably.

"Well, listen. I'm going to make you forget all this and feel a lot better," I said. I slid an avuncular arm around his shaking shoulders, and the needle tip of my disguised hypodermic into his upper arm. The poor guy didn't even flinch.

"Now, you just sit there and in a little while you'll feel much calmer."

Nikephoros nodded obediently and sat there waiting to forget. I got up and reached into the cabinet. Yep, there was a long wooden case in there. Sitting down again, I took out the scroll that it held and took a look.

It was in Greek script now, not the hieroglyphs I'd used on the original. Most of the sketches were still recognizable, though—they'd probably been traced, to keep them as accurate as possible. The formulae for monolithic sculpture looked to be screwed up beyond all hope; but the ones for painting were just fine. Worse luck for Nikephoros and the gang.

"How are you feeling now?" I asked.

"I'm . . . tired. But my head doesn't hurt anymore," he said. "Who are you? How are you doing this? Why are you helping me?"

"I'm an angel, Nikephoros, an angel of the Lord. And you are an innocent man who doesn't deserve to be cursed with this knowledge. Here, look at this." I held the scroll open before him—he stared, rapt. "See all that? I want you to forget it. All of it. Just as easy as forgetting a dream. Close your eyes and never think of it again."

The drug I'd given him not only erased memories, it increased focus so you could tell the subject *what* to forget. The River Lethe has nothing on Dr. Zeus's chemists. Nikephoros shut his eyes and let out a long peaceful sigh.

I caught his head as he started to fall over, and laid him down on the bench.

"You'll sleep now, and not remember anything about how you painted the ikons," I told him again. "You'll only remember that an angel came and took the scroll, and told you . . . there are things mortal man was not meant to know. You can tell Isidore I said so. Tell him he can use ordinary ikons, and that Hagia Sophia will stand for a thousand years."

"Will it?" asked Nikephoros sleepily.

I calculated a quick sum. "Yes, it really will. Longer, in fact."

"All right." And he smiled like a happy child, and went obediently to sleep.

I searched through his studio then, looking for ikons or scrolls. There were no other instructions from the old days in Egypt, thank all the gods—but I found Augusta Pulcheria. I wrapped her securely and stacked her with the other two. He wasn't kidding—the effect of the lady's smile was absolutely amazing. Mona Lisa it was not. Nikephoros could have revolutionized pornography with this technique, if pornography had needed any help. . . .

There was a fourth prepared slab, but only an initial coat of gesso had gone on it so far. A note on a scrap of parchment informed me that Isidore was hoping for Tychicus of Chalcedon. I left it there—Nikephoros' work would be harmless now. But I wrapped the other three up in a bundle with the scroll, and took them all away with me.

Nikephoros was still sleeping like a baby. And still smiling.

When I got back to my compound, I found the basket project in full swing in the courtyard. The Preserver who knew baskets—a very pretty girl named Perdita; she was a striking dark-eyed blonde, who'd been saved from tribal warfare in Dalmatia—was obviously having a fine time teaching all my big, hairy Security techs how to weave wickerwork through the timber frames they'd built. It looked like it would work in time to get the caravan off by tomorrow.

"I think I'm gonna have a special package to add to that before you leave, boys," I said as I passed through. "Perdita, honey, build one of those things with a lid, okay?"

A chorus of affirmatives followed me up the stairs to my own quarters. Morale was obviously high with the resident operatives. Maybe I should organize some more practical ethnic skills classes between the Security boys and the Preservers. . . .

Once locked in my office, I warmed up the credenza and was able to report a complete victory to the anonymous clerk on the other end.

*Query: No further complications?*

*Me: None. All the affected ikons are in my possession, the source of the effect has been isolated and is also in my possession, and the painter has been drugged to forget the entire thing. There will be no more magic ikons here.*

*Query: What was the cause?*

*Me: A Greek translation of the old Egyptian mathematical formulae for perfect images. Isidore had it. I have it now.*

*Query: How did Isidore get it?*

*Me: How the hell should I know? I haven't seen the formula since I left it with the priests in Heliopolis twenty-five hundred years ago! What do you want done with all this stuff now?*

*Statement: Ship the scroll and all ikons to the warehouse in Venice, with Security escort. They will be processed from there.*

*Me: Acknowledged.*

*Statement: Blather blather squeeeal.*

And that was that—the transmission was over. No reaction, no comment, certainly no congratulations—but I had the satisfaction of knowing I'd carried out another cockeyed assignment successfully, ha ha. Tangible successes go a long way toward making this job bearable, in the long run. And it's all in the long run for us.

Isidore went on with his church building, and Hagia Sophia was technically completed in 537. Wouldn't you know it, though—Isidore complained loudly about the loss of Nikephoros' magic ikons once they were gone; the guy's regular work just wasn't as striking. Isidore conveniently overlooked the little problem with their striking observers literally dead. Typical upper management.

Isidore deserved whatever grief he got, in my opinion. And he was still living there when Justinian's Plague finally broke out in 542, which was probably enough trouble for anyone.

Me, I got all my people out at least two years before the Plague started, and didn't think about any of this for another fifteen hundred or so years.

Which turned out to be a mistake, but hey. I'm not a god. I just work for one. ○

If it moves farther away;  
if it passes one quickly,  
if it's massive and dilates  
time in its gravitational  
well. I awake to the neighbor's  
radio, the emergency broadcast

system. Light lengthened to  
the end of the visible

whenever I went outside.  
The radio played

"Soak Up the Sun."  
Everyone reddened and I

was left wondering if you  
were moving away and if

it would take a longer  
forever. I put on Miles

Davis, "Kind of Blue," and I  
sing your mass away, worried

I wouldn't recognize  
an event horizon in time.

—Barbara Duffey

## REDSHIFT



**Kit Reed's most recent books are the collection *The Story Until Now: A Great Big Book of Stories* (Wesleyan University Press), a Shirley Jackson nominee, and her novel, *Son of Destruction* (Severn House), both of which appeared in 2013. *Where*, her next novel, will be out this coming summer from Tor. The book owes something to this new story of loss and . . .**

# MILITARY SECRETS

**Kit Reed**

**W**hen the first bell rings, Mother Immaculata marches us outside for a special announcement. We have to line up on the playground according to size. While the taller kids file into rows behind us, we shuffle in place, wondering.

What is this, anyway? That “special,” attached to “announcement.” Will it be a surprise day off? Games instead of times tables or just ice cream at lunch? Maybe it’s a field trip, orange busses lined up to take us all to Water World? Or . . .

My gut stutters. The biggest thing.

Then Mother Immaculata says, “Everybody whose father isn’t dead, take one step forward,” and everybody in the front row steps forward but me.

*God, don’t make me throw up.*

She repeats the way nuns do, in case you didn’t get it. “Jessie, I *said*, everybody whose father isn’t dead. . . .” Then she drops her arm like a starter’s flag. Our whole long row marches off the playground and up the ramp into the gym. I can’t.

I have to stay where I am with the second row running up my heels. There are more kids lined up behind them, row after row, up to ninth grade. Even Mother Immaculata is impatient, but I can’t move. She comes down on me so fast that her big fat rosary rattles. She grabs my shoulder, hard, and turns me around. “See that?”

It’s a square of red tape laid out on the tarmac next to the bleachers. “Yes, Stir.”

She gives me a push. “Into the box.”

*He isn’t dead, I just don’t know where he is, okay?* “Yes, Stir.”

For a long time, I’m the only one in the box.

When I was nine, the doorbell rang in the night. I went running down, but Western Union was gone. There was more in the telegram than she ever told, but I didn’t know. That night she said it was just Uncle Forrest, investment things, now go back to bed. She waited until morning to tell me anything at all.

I was eating my cornflakes in the sunshine when she began. The Navy thinks Daddy’s missing in action, she said, Don’t worry, eat your breakfast, it’s probably a mistake. I think she said, it says they just lost track of him, that’s all, but she never explained. Then she went back inside herself and slammed all the doors. Daddy was “missing,” she told me every time I asked; that’s all she said.

\* \* \*

I had to wait until she died to read the telegram. After the funeral I went through her things, which you do when your only mother dies. I found letters she wrote to the Navy Department in the same carton; carbon copies, neatly stored. When the Navy declared he was officially dead, she kept writing. She followed up on rumors, reported sightings, fresh details from shipmates who had made it home; for decades she numbered reasons to believe **MISSING** meant exactly that.

Lost means they will find him, right?

Right.

This is how kids think. It's how I thought.

All the telegram said, Mother told me the next day, was that they didn't know where Daddy was. She finally got up and put on lipstick the day after: she said, Don't worry, they're out looking for him right now. I wrote the rest inside my head every day after that. His nice new submarine could be silent running, he's out there, but it's a military secret. He'll come back and tell us all about it. Unless he's on a desert island somewhere—accident at sea, he and his crew are stamping S.O.S. into the sand—unless they're bobbing on life rafts because something hurt the sub. Living on fish and rainwater. People in books did that, and Americans in prison camps gave their name and rank and serial number and they never gave in. Skippers helped their men no matter what the guards tried on them, they worked together to escape. He and his crew could be tunneling out right now, crawling on their elbows through deep sand. If not, we would go in and rescue them as soon as we won the war.

Three weeks after we got the telegram, the mailman brought us letters from Daddy, and look. They were postmarked two days after Mrs. Simpson struggled up our front steps with her sympathy casserole. First proof.

He's still out there.

It was only Thursday, so I made peanut butter and jelly on saltines and went to school.

When you're little, missing in action means a lot of things; the one thing it doesn't mean is dead.

They're out there looking for him, right?

So I went into Sister Marcella's room like always and sat in my same desk in the back, between Teeny Shail and Betsy Braswell. We ate on our same bench by the lunchroom window, and I didn't talk about the telegram, so they didn't have to know. See, officers' children don't cry. When he left for California I felt awful, but officers' children don't cry, not even when you can't see. He's counting on us to be brave. Besides, for all I knew they were finding him that very day, pulling him out of the water while I messed up long division or copied the names of the state capitals off the board. After the last bell I ran all the way home. It would be over and the kids would never even know.

Mother would come running out to tell me they made a mistake and we'd have waffles and cocoa to celebrate.

Instead it was big old Mrs. Simpson from across the street with a casserole; she was on our front porch, sniffing. She could hardly wait to say *you poor thing*, and she got upset because I wouldn't cry with her and I didn't let her inside. I had to take the casserole to make her go away. Mother was still in her room with the shades down, *Don't bother me*. She didn't come out for supper so when it got dark I had casserole and went to bed because tomorrow I had school.

Next day Sister Marcella popped out of the double front doors at St. Paul's too fast,

like she'd been lying in wait. She knelt down in the middle of the sidewalk right in front of me so I couldn't get past. Kids started piling up behind. I guess she wanted to hug, but this dry cleaning smell came up from her habit along with other smells so I couldn't. Her face kept sliding around. *Oh, don't! Sister Marcella, don't cry.* Thank God she didn't. It was just an almost, which was good. Then she opened her mouth and words fell out. "Oh you poor child, you've lost your father," like it was something I did.

Then she pinned a Miraculous Medal on my collar and told me to be brave, right out where everybody could see. Kids stared, all but the ones that wouldn't look at me.

The Friday paper was on the bulletin board so it was the first thing everybody saw. His picture was up there on the front page. It didn't make it true, but now everybody knew. I don't know why it made me feel guilty. You just do.

I got through the rest of that year thinking, if *one more kid* in our school got the telegram, at least there would be two of us, but that year, nobody did. Hope made me savage. In fifth grade, I thought at least one transfer kid would come and I'd see it in his face. He'd walk into our classroom and we'd both know and I wouldn't have to be the only one. I hated it. Other kids' fathers got blown out of the sky or shot dead in combat all the time and our school would have a Mass for them, but we are not the same. When they tell your mother that he's killed in action, at least you know.

Missing is still out there, no matter what they say.

You miss him every day. Even after you find the telegram she kept: **AND PRESUMED DEAD** you play out the possibilities. You think, one day he'll walk through that door. You keep thinking it long after you look up and do the math. You're the exact same age he was when he got lost. Older, then much older, but still . . . then you consider what time has done to him, what he looks like now and what he needs, but that's okay. You won't care what he looks like or how hard it is, when he walks in that door you'll be glad. You spin out the years thinking, *I will take care of him.*

By the time Mother Immaculata was done that day there were three of us standing in the red tape box, watching the ordinary people follow Mother Immaculata back into the building, row on row, leaving us exposed—two big kids from the middle school: this girl Dorcas and Bill, who's tall as a tenth grader, and me.

At the top of the ramp Mother Immaculata sees the last row up the ramp and back into regular life inside. Then she turns and gives us a look. We shuffle, not exactly looking at each other, frightened and excited—*You, too!*—and ashamed because we're both girls but we're nothing alike, gaudy Dorcas with your uniform skirt rolled way up above your knees.

No. We are alike, we just didn't know.

Mother Immaculata doesn't say our names, but we can feel her eyes on us. We have our orders. "You wait."

Either the tarmac grows or we shrink.

When the doors shut on the mother superior her building goes away, leaving us three alone on the playground. For reasons. There's nothing in sight to remind us where we are, which town in what state, or even what country. There's just us three eddying on the tarmac, and at the far end of the playground, a bus. Did that bus pull up while we were watching Mother Immaculata direct traffic away from us, or has it been out here the whole time?

It's a grey steel cylinder with darkened windows, sleek as a bullet and all of a piece, everything tightly sealed until we're close enough. Odd: it hasn't moved. Neither have we, but here it is. The doors pop open.

It's for us.

We climb on board, in hopes.

The doors which shut on our heels and the motor starts before we can make it up

the steps, but you get used to that. When you're a kid you can't ask for explanations. You do as you're told.

The inside of the bus is even darker than the steely shell. As we come up the steps Dorcas tries, "Hello?" Nobody speaks. We blunder down the aisle all pardon me, excuse me, looking for seats. Nobody moves, even when Bill fake-loses his balance and bumps them so he can fake-apologize.

We go along in the dark, following beads of light in the floor to our seats in the very back row. It's so dark in here that we can't make out who the others are, only that they're kids and they won't talk to us. Whether they're asleep or drugged or just pretending is never clear. We'll never find out where these kids were or what they were doing when they got picked up or why they were picked up in the first place or why we're all in here together, although I can guess. That's okay, I think as we stumble into the back row, but I hate that that it took us forever to get here, and these are the last seats in the bus.

And that there are so many people in here. From the outside the bus doesn't look that big, but there's no bus driver to steer by, no teacher herding us, nobody to ask. When you grow up without explanations, you don't ask. You keep doing what you have to do.

As if he is watching. In hopes.

Days go by, at least I think it's been days. Food happens, I think, but I can't know if it really does. Sometimes the bus fills with the smell of food, people farting, shifting in all the rows ahead of us, but the only ones I hear talking are Dorcas and Bill and me, and only a little bit. It's questions, like why they won't talk to us and when is the food, although we never get hungry. The bathrooms are right across the aisle from us, but nobody comes and I don't have to go.

As we ride along we wonder, but we don't really want to know. It's enough to be running along ahead of the sad outcasts we were in the last place. Every few hours or days Bill or Dorcas will ask where this thing is going and we name places we used to live and places we want to see, just not the one we really care about, in part because we don't know exactly where that is. We don't ask each other who we're looking for because that's too personal, but we all know why we're here.

All the regular kids went back into the building that day, everybody but us. I think the war orphans left that place shortly after the telegram came to their house, unless the service sent somebody to break the news. Poor kids, their fathers got killed, this won't make it better but at least they know. And the rest? Ordinary, so they belong at St. Paul's. His job was essential to the war effort on the home front or he was too sick to serve; either way he didn't have to go. Either he never went to war, or it ended and he came home, we don't know.

I know that they made Dorcas and Bill and me wait in the red tape box because we don't belong in that school.

There is no real place for us. Mother Immaculata thought one thing, but we know another. *Not dead.*

They just don't know where he is, is all.

So here we are parked side by side by side in the back row of the bus, sitting here in the dark and it's nothing we did, it's who we are. Then the silence gets too heavy and we talk. Or I think we do.

Bill starts. "So where were all the kids whose fathers did get killed?"

"What?"

"You know, back on the playground."

It comes out of Dorcas in a wail. "I don't know, I don't *know*."



I do. "They don't go to our school."

"Oh."

Bill pushes: "Is that better or worse than this?"

Dorcas is quick. "Oh, it's much worse."

Not me: "I don't know, I don't *know*."

Change the subject, Jessie. Change it fast, but don't ask the next question. It's too personal. Never ask us where we were when we got the telegram.

Don't make us tell you what that was like.

I ask the question that it's okay to ask. "Where did they say he was when it happened?"

"Chosin." It comes out of Bill like a cough.

Dorcas whips her head around, all puzzled. "What's that?"

"You don't know?"

I think, but do not tell her, *Different war*.

Bill turns to me. "Yours?"

"Coral Sea."

"Where was yours?"

Dorcas finally gets it. "Manila Bay."

We all do. Bill stands up and yells at the backs of a hundred heads on the unmoved, unmoving bodies slouched in seats ahead of us because they got on the bus before we did. He yells loud enough to reach everybody in every row all the way to the front of the bus and Mother Immaculata and all those ordinary kids back at our old school.

Shouting, "Where did they tell you they lost him?"

And the answers come from every row, all the way to the front of the bus. When they do, it is stupendous.

"Tikrit," and "Manassas," "Da Nang," "Belleau Woods," "Benghazi," "Agadir . . ."

The names of all the old wars and certain new ones and wars we haven't heard of yet come out in a blast, cries that go on and on, as though whatever the nail is, Bill hit it on the head.

For the first time the bus stops.

Ahead of us, the others cough and shift in their seats, embarrassed. Reassembling themselves. There's the confused stir of someone standing, way up there in the front of the bus, followed by the doors whishing open, the hush of footsteps stifled as the thoughtful person or people hurry down and out. Then the doors wish shut and clamp tight so we can shove off.

In the back row the three of us scramble to change places, shuffling ourselves like a deck of cards so we can take turns craning at the window, but there's nothing to see. It looks darker out there than it is in here. The bus is moving again, everything dark and everybody silent, sending the three of us back into our own heads where we sit, curled up tight around our hopes. The bus stops again, long enough for someone new to get out. It's probably time for the third row to line up at the exit, but at the next stop, nobody leaves. I don't hear that gasp the doors make when they wish open, or the rush of somebody pounding down the steps, which is a puzzle. At least nobody gets on.

At the next stop so many people get off that I can't count them and all my blood backs up in my head: *Me next, me, me!*

Dozens get off and nobody comes back. A good thing, I tell myself. It could mean . . .  
*Oh, Jessie. Don't.*

But the next time we stop kids seem to get off in no particular order, from the front of the bus, the middle of the bus, anywhere in the bus; they scatter before the doors clamp shut on their heels while the rest of us ride on, and I begin to think . . .

I don't want to think.

Bill says it. "We're never getting off this fucking bus."

If John Paul Jones had a wife and kids that he left behind to fight for whatever; if

he never came back, they're probably sitting up there in the dark somewhere near the front of our bus. Waiting. We aren't all the same age, in fact we're nothing alike. We are none of us the same person. What we are is people whose fathers got lost in some war, frozen at the age we were when we first heard. It won't matter when this happened to us or which war, the only thing that matters is, lost can mean anything. No matter how long you live or what they tell you later, he's still out there—and you mull the unfinished sentence as you run on, listening for the rest. ○

# The Fates Rebel

They spin, measure, and cut the threads  
Athena weaves to fabric.

But they watched Penelope  
Unweave by night  
The patterns she had woven in the day  
So that the loom never filled.

Since then, sometimes Clotho picks apart  
The twist of the thread  
And balls it up again  
To take its place in chaos  
On the spindle

Or Lachesis keeps losing count  
Of how many times she's held and folded off  
The length from shoulder to her fingertips.

Atropos has no recourse.  
Cut thread is cut.

All Death can do to be without  
Her power of ending

Is to grab the spindle  
By its sharp and stabbing end  
And let the thorns grow up around the castle.

Death lies sleeping, then.  
Atropos dreams of lives  
Turning on the wheel.

—Ruth Berman



**Greg Bossert's most recent story in *Asimov's*, "Bloom" (December 2013), was a finalist for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award, and his story "The Telling" won the 2013 World Fantasy Award for Short Fiction. Greg wrangles spaceships and superheroes at his day job at Industrial Light & Magic in the San Francisco. His sixth story for us was originally drafted at the 2010 Clarion Writer's Workshop; some of the inspiration came from mutual trust under pressure evident in his fellow students and instructors there, not to mention a few late nights of tall tales and emptied bottles. Nothing as wild or dangerous, though, as the crew of the *Tethys* and their game of . . .**

# TWELVE AND TAG

**Gregory Norman Bossert**

**"** . . . **T**welve and Tag," we shouted, and Cheung added, "You two know it?" Zandt lowered his brows and frowned.

Adra shook her head, looked around at us. She did that, searching faces for clues about what was expected of her. "You mean tee-ay-gee like T-complete Associative Gestalt? Crew's got the sort of money for neural backup?" she asked.

Cheung said, "Not tech. It's a bar game. A slam, a rap."

Zandt's brows lowered further over pale eyes.

"An improvised impression. And then you tell stories, the worst thing, stupidest thing, most painful thing you've ever done."

"Or kindest," added Nava, back from the bar with drinks balanced in both hands. And to our chorus of complaints, "That's the way we do it—"

"—on Mars," we shouted, the crew of the *Tethys*. All but Adra and Zandt. They weren't really crew yet, not until this was done.

"This ain't Mars," Orit said, and bounced her head off the window behind her, layers of clear composite and beyond it the flat flat beige of Europa, Jupiter's fat belly propped on the horizon.

"Something we do," Perelman rumbled.

"Breaks the ice," Orit said, to groans. All we *did* was break the ice, down into the ocean that lay underneath Europa's surface.

"It's not just ice that breaks," Cheung said, "doing what we do." His fingers mimed something snapping. "It's equipment, people, whole ships sometimes. Got to know each other."

"Gotta *trust*," Nava said. She was harpoonist, which these days meant piloting a remote vehicle on a two-kilometer cable, and, as if to make up for that, everything about her was sharp. She gave Adra a sharp smile now, then flicked it at Zandt.

Adra was second-shift pilot, had been for two months. Lean and grey, swept-back eyes so dark they seemed opaque, or empty. This was her first shore leave with us; she'd come in mid-mission after her predecessor had lost an arm in a blowout.

Our assayer had just lost his nerve after that. That's the position Zandt had recently dropped into. Literally: he'd landed in-system that morning from who-knew-where, resume in hand, "ship = *Tethys*" scrawled in the margin. He hung over the table like Jupiter over the surface out the window, blond hair swept back onto broad shoulders, something in the hard lines of his face keeping him from easy handsomeness.

Adra and Zandt were already signed by the captain, but contracts could be revoked or applicants left stranded if the crew decided against the hire. That's why we were here.

We? The crew. Perelman was mate, solid, methodical, the wall between the captain and the rest. He left the running of things to Cheung, he's navigator, and Yu, she's main-shift pilot. Even the captain deferred to those two. Cheung, he was always in motion, always quick to find the right words. Yu was always still, always looking *Out* into the deep, yet somehow saw everything anyway.

Orit was cook; that's not a junior role, not on a ship that spends six months at a time under the ice. She was likely to be at the bottom of any trouble or atop another crewmember, but she always cleaned up her own messes.

Who else? Nava you already know. Patel was there, engineer, and most of the hands: Keita and Barb, Deighton and Sintra. We filled all the spots around the one long, battered table, driving the other patrons into the corners or up to the bar. It was all deep-ocean crew in this place. There were other bars for the spacers, administrators, tourists, and if any of these wandered in here, they'd be driven out soon enough by the noise and the roughhousing and the smell that clung of Europa's strange secret ocean.

That ocean was thick: with alien viruses, with complex hydrocarbons that triggered fatal autoimmune reactions, with larger creatures that fed on the sludge, and on each other, and on us. We scooped the sludge, trapped the creatures, sold the lot to brokers who sold in turn to the universities and corporations. The Outer System was one big boomtown, bigger than the whole damn Inner System by orders of magnitude, by any metric.

"So we tell a story . . ." Adra said.

"Two stories," Yu said, "one of them true, one of them false."

"And then we go around the table and vote on which was the lie."

"A bet?" Zandt said.

"A confirmation," Cheung said.

Perelman nodded, rumbled agreement.

"Though if we guess right, you buy a round," Orit added.

Cheung said, "I'll go first, so you know how it goes." He laced his fingers together, closed his eyes, a beat, opened eyes and hands, took a breath. No Twelve and Tag for Cheung; the crew knew him too well. But if there had been, the tag would be "flight." Fragile bones spread under his face like bird's wings, bird's eyes, too, black and always flitting, fingers light and fast on the ship consoles, on the table here. Hard to imagine him anywhere but *Out*, doing anything but Nav, but he'd been a singer back on Earth. The crew knew *his* stories.

"Stupidest, then," Cheung started. "I was with the captain out at Saturn, a dozen years ago. Ice mining in the Rings. I was young, thought I knew the ship, thought I

knew the system. So, we found a vein heavy with tholins.” A fleeting glance up at Zandt, who gave a slow nod.

“Natural organics, worth their weight in the Outer System for hydroponics, industry,” Zandt said.

Cheung nodded back. “We didn’t have processing facilities onship. Ice mining, you just grab hold of a piece, push it out to a moon or a station. Tholins, they’re dark, easy to see in the ice. If we had pulled up to Titan station with a twenty tonne chunk of that, the market would have been ready for us. They’d set a price before we even docked, lose us 20 percent, maybe more. So I had the idea to cut across to the research station around Enceladus, process there, ship the tholins back to Titan in tanks, hit the market and get out before they knew the score.

“Enceladus was far side of Saturn so we cut across the Rings, close above the clouds, serious *v*, flung ourselves out the far side.

“We hit something over the B Ring that didn’t show on sensors, probably just a dense pocket of dust, but we were moving fast. All I knew was, one minute I was watching the monitors, green down the board, and then *woosh* half the ship was gone. Main drivers, cargo. Seven crew. Left us in a spin that I couldn’t kill with the thrusters I had left. Left us on a course that didn’t go anywhere except *Out*.”

Orit shivered, and Yu got that far-gone look she got, straight through the wall and into the deep.

“Long range coms were gone. All we could do was hope Enceladus picked up our beacon, had someone in-station fast enough to catch us. Four days of that spin. Spin wouldn’t let you eat, wouldn’t let you sleep for more than a few minutes before you’d wake up, convinced you were falling. All we could do was watch the view, Saturn, Rings, stars, Saturn, Rings, stars. The captain and I and the one remaining crewmember: ‘I’m not backed up, I’ll be *lost*,’ she kept saying, round and round, until we had to sedate her.

“Thing was, I *was* backed up. A full T.A.G. back on Earth, nothing to be scared of, nothing to lose. I wasn’t scared, I was *furious*. I hadn’t had an update since I’d gotten to the Outer System. If I died and they brought me back, I’d lose a year, I’d lose those four days spinning across the Rings. And I couldn’t stand the idea of losing that view.”

Cheung’s lips twitched, a quick humorless grin.

“We’ll always want more than the tech can give us. And stupid masquerading as clever; that’s the worst kind.”

Adra looked around the table, looking for a hint from the crew. Some eyes met hers, some looked up at the low ceiling, sheet steel and pitted with rust, or out through the plexi at Jupiter.

“If you’re a restored copy, how do you know all this?” she asked, like an accusation.

Cheung shrugged. “Enceladus Station had been tracking us the entire time, got a tug out in time to snare us. That’s how the captain and I got into under-ice work, stuck on Enceladus without a ship. But the oceans here on Europa were deeper.” He took a sip, swallowed, and started his second story.

“A triangle is the strongest shape. Fact. People have known it for a long time, though it took Fuller back in the twentieth century to explain how that fact unfolds across what we know.

“I was twenty. Grad school in Hong Kong. That was right after the referendum, the Second Independence, the first successful neural-nano backups, and HK was the heart of everything that was . . . everything. I was singing all night, studying all day, drinking and drugging and dragging all night *and* day, no stop, no sleep. Had a boyfriend, Grant, kept me out of the worst of the trouble. Tall, always stooped over

like he was looking for something he'd dropped. Couldn't keep his glasses on straight. He was in the planetary navigation program with me, brilliant at it."

Cheung turned his head, looked out across Orit and the window and the plains to Jupiter, a long quiet look for him.

"He was gentle in bed. Generous. Never minded my nights out, even though the nights were getting longer. Morning was our time. We'd tell each other that if we could ever afford to get T.A.G.ed, we'd just record one of those mornings and live in it forever.

"I was singing fado, it'd been an underground thing in Macau but suddenly HK was the right place, right time, and I was big. Advertising deals, guest spots on the telenovelas, corporate sponsorship from VanZ. I had company lawyers circling me like mad moons: sing here, be seen there, wear this, drink that, an endless supply of drugs, nano, people. Anything to keep me busy, anything to keep me *there* making money for them.

"So I got my own lawyer. Leslie. She was from Singapore. Tiny. Quiet. You'd be sitting in a room, forget she was there, and then she'd reach a hand out, touch your shoulder. Should have been a shock, but it was like . . ."

Cheung's fingers fluttered downward.

"... rain falling, when you hadn't realized you were hot and dry.

"Grant and Leslie, they started meeting evenings, talking, about me, mostly, and what I was in, and how to get me out of it. One day, Leslie was still there when I got home in the morning.

"Next five months . . ."

His hands settled to the table.

"The next five months were perfect. Leslie broke deals, made new ones; suddenly I was getting paid for singing, money in the bank. Grant even came to the clubs to see me sing. He'd never risked the crowd on his own. The two of them would find a table near the front, and afterward I'd sit down with them, with no desire for anything, anyone, anywhere else."

Adra leaned in, whispered to Nava, "Is this 'kindest thing'? Because he already took 'stupid.'"

Nava put a finger to her lips. Cheung gave Adra a glance. His fingers danced around the edge of his mug.

"Five months," he continued, "and then Grant and I had our degrees. Nav certified, from UHK, any ship in the System would take us on. But Grant was talking about a PhD, teaching at the university. I'd sing, he said, and Leslie would make enough money to support the three of us, enough to get us T.A.G.ed. Nano-neural backups had only hit the market a couple of years before, but the startups were booming in HK and suddenly you only had to be filthy rich to get T.A.G.ed. Those VanZ billboards were everywhere; beautiful people doing beautiful things and then the image would freeze with one word splashed across it: Forever. That was before the hack on the Great Basin longstore, no reason to doubt that 'Forever.'"

"I didn't sleep for two nights after our certifications came through from the university. I walked, mostly, around and around the block. The HK night is too bright for stars and ships and moons, but I'd spent five years learning to do navigation in my head. No matter how I did the math, the course just led around that block again. 'Forever.'"

"So I transferred all the money I had to a bank on Mars. Took a shuttle up to orbit the next morning. When I left them, they were still asleep, Leslie laid perfectly straight as always, Grant sprawled diagonal, their heads together on the pillow.

"Triangles. Too perfect. Too strong for me. I had to fly then, go *Out*, or never leave." He looked at Adra. "So, worst thing."

Adra said, "You've made it out this far, and Jupiter the sharp edge of things these days, and that's the worst you've done? I don't believe it. Regret for the view, I buy, but not for the leaving. The first story is the true one." She looked around at the crew. Nava smiled, sharp teeth and narrow eyes.

Yu held her hands up, palms out. "We've heard his stories."

Perelman said, "It's your round, just the two of you." And looked at Zandt.

Who bit his lip and looked at the table, where Cheung's fingers had lit amongst the glasses. "You wouldn't be the first to see the trap in neuro-nano memories," he said, a deep voice, not Perelman's rumble, higher pitched but full, like the pedal tone on an organ. "Wouldn't be the first to hope the *Out* offered more. Anyway . . ." He looked up, caught Cheung's gaze in his own. "This crew wouldn't take you if you'd lost the captain a ship. First one's the lie."

Claps and stomps, and Patel slapped Zandt on the shoulder; might as well have slapped a stone. Adra's face fell flat, not so much a frown as indifference.

"Truth," Yu said. "The first story? That's mine. I was the surviving crewmember. It was the navigator who lost it, though, terrified about being restored from backup and losing those years, that view. We didn't sedate her; she took the drugs herself, all of them, two days before the tug caught us. Not that I wouldn't have helped her if I'd known. She was more worried about losing her memories than about losing seven crew, the arrogant shit." Yu was staring *Out*, straight through Adra, breathless, still. "Captain and I were the only ones left then, three months on Enceladus, stumbling from bar to bar, still spinning, until we met Cheung and he took us down under the ice."

Cheung's fingers brushed the top of Yu's hand, paused for a beat.

Yu took a breath then. "I was T.A.G.ed too," she said. "Would have been glad to lose those months, get to rediscover the Outer system again, see those views again for the first time." She shrugged, a millimeter motion against the ice out the window. "Missed that chance. My backup was at Great Basin. All gone now."

Zandt pushed himself up from the table. His stick was leaning against the wall under the window; when he reached for it, it toppled away from him, clashed to the floor. Yu leaned down, picked it up, but Zandt had already turned to limp toward the toilet.

Cheung took the stick from Yu. It was proportioned to Zandt, long, thick, dark wood with a hint of grain. The head was massive, a dragon caught mid-snarl in stainless steel. Orit leaned across Adra, stuck her finger into the dragon's mouth. "Shit!" she said, and sucked a drop of blood.

Nava laughed. "Always got to stick it into everything, Orit, don't you?"

Orit leered around her mouthful of finger.

Cheung got up, set the stick by Zandt's chair; it settled against the window edge with a *thud*. Cheung tapped Yu on the shoulder, and they went up to the bar.

"So. Adra," Cheung said.

Adra looked back at him over the rim of her glass, drained it. "So," she said, gave that same flat look to the rest of the crew.

"Twelve and Tag," Perelman said, his checklist voice, and we sat up, quieted down. A round of looks, at each other and back to her.

Cheung said, "It goes like this. Someone throws out an adjective, someone matches with a noun, starts with the same sound, or at least hits it somewhere. Six pairs, then someone sums it up with the tag, one word. It's all about impressions."

"Gotta be fast," Nava said.

"Gotta be *true*," Perelman grumbled. "Who's first?"

Orit said, "I got it." A pause, an arm up, fingers spread—*look at me*, that was Orit—and then she slapped the table and started it round:

"Lank,"  
*Barb:* "Leg, Tart,"  
*Sintra:* "Tongue, Fast" ("yeah, you wish!")  
*Patel:* "Flat" (doubtful "huh" from Yu), "Trim,"  
*Nava:* "Teat, Sharp" ("she always says 'sharp'")  
*Cheung:* "Gash" (laughs, a whistle from Orit), "Sheer,"  
*Perelman:* "Razor,"  
 And Yu tagged it with: "Lash."

Adra followed the tag around the table, from face to face with that blank stare she got, as if trying to interpret some inexplicable foreign phrase, ended on Yu for a long while but Yu's face gave her nothing but Yu's own long look. Finally she shrugged, looked into Zandt's heavy golden frown instead.

She said, "Before I came on the *Tethys*, I was pilot on the *Laelaps* out of Conamara. She's not a hunter like *Tethys*, she's a mapper, nine-tenths sonar systems and a single-shift crew, dull dull work. We were under the ice—"

"No," Cheung said.

Adra froze, lips pulled thin against the sibilant "ice," chin tucked into her shoulder to face Cheung, who was sat next to her.

"No stories set under the ice," Cheung said.

"Not a good idea to lie about what goes on under the ice, not in this bar," Nava said, one eyebrow raised, one pointed nail flicking—*ting*—against her glass.

"And *we* already know the truth of it," someone said softly.

Adra shut her eyes, rolled them under her lids, opened them again on Cheung.

"Telenovelas, huh?" she said. "A story about telenovelas, that okay? Or are there more rules you haven't mentioned?"

The corners of Cheung's lips quirked up.

"Sure," Nava said.

"That's fine," Yu clarified.

"Telenovelas, then, and the worst thing I ever did." Adra said. "Passing someone else's weakness off as my own.

"I used to play piano. I started when I was two, so in the earliest memories I have now, I was already playing piano, and I was already good. A prodigy. There were many prodigies in Taipei, many piano prodigies, many little girl piano prodigies. We all performed in our little dresses with little bows in our hair, an endless chain of competitions, and when we weren't performing, we were practicing, or taking lessons, or reviewing video of our last recital, while she took apart my playing, note by note."

Adra lifted her glass; it was empty. Yu filled it from her own bottle, local algae beer, pale green and bitter. Adra downed it and grimaced.

"My teacher, I mean. Cold-hearted bitch. Always pushing me, never satisfied. Not just about the playing, either, it was my posture, the way I walked across the stage, my clothing which *I* didn't even fucking choose, but she complained about it anyway. Not that *she'd* ever gotten anywhere with her playing, not since some award when she was in grade school.

"My father was a Russian diplomat; Mother was a translator. They were both rich, family money, though she had more. Father must have always felt a little . . . weak, because of that. Russian men, they're supposed to be strong, in charge, head of the family. But it was her city, her culture, even her apartment; we lived in one of her family's places, in Dàan, took up two entire floors of the building.

"Maybe that's why he started to beat me. I was something he could be in charge of. Any excuse would do: an A-minus on a school paper, having one sock pulled higher



than the other, getting caught watching telenovelas out of HK, the ones with the awful pop music.”

Adra turned her flat stare on Cheung for a moment, blinked like she’d suddenly matched a memory.

“And I was such a *damn* good girl. I’d stand there and take it, and,” Adra paused, teeth tight, bobbed her head, “*curtsy* afterward. And go back to my fucking lessons.”

Yu had refilled Adra’s glass. She took another swig, a high-tide line of green scum on her lip. “What *is* this crap?” But she drank again, wiped her mouth.

“Eight years of that, then, practice and punishment, from those first, earliest memories until the day I came up with my plan. I woke up one morning, the idea in my head. I felt so *buzzed*. First time I thought I understood what people meant when they said ‘happy.’

“It was the telenovelas that gave me the idea. All that drama, every day a new disaster, another death, just because someone’s *feelings* were hurt. I watched them because they were funny. I’d lay there and laugh at the foolish people slipping on the same emotional banana peel over and over again. But what I realized that night was that those shows weren’t just funny, they were *true*. That’s what people are really like. That’s how they manipulate each other, rip each other apart with their own weakness, like Father and Mother. I could do that.

“The next months were all flubbed notes and bad posture, forgotten homework and crying fits. But it didn’t work. I was getting more criticism, more beatings, not less. No matter how hard I studied the videos, no matter how much I practiced in front of the mirror, I couldn’t quite get that vulnerability that let you hook people, draw them in and spin them round.

“And then one of the ‘novelas did a story arc on neuro-nano. The illegal kind, pirated memories. This character got addicted, started acting like she was someone else entirely. That’s what I needed.

“Money was no problem; I’d been hacking my parents’ accounts since I was eight. Turns out supply was no problem, either; the big HK corporations do their manufacturing on Taiwan, just to piss off the mainland. The stuff leaked out onto the street. Literally, sometimes. The towns downwind of the plants got real strange, whole neighborhoods sharing the same strayed memory. Plenty of people willing to sell you a vial of someone else’s pitiful past, even if you were a kid in knee socks, as long as you could pay.

“Now I had every human failing at my fingertips, not faked but real, as real as memory.

“After that, there were no more beatings. Not for me. Punishments, yes, dinners denied, privileges suspended, and there was always the bamboo switch. But the real beatings, those stopped. It was like all those years, they hadn’t wanted perfection, they’d wanted *weakness*. The beatings stopped as soon as I started crying someone else’s tears.

“Stopped for me, that is, not for my mother. I’d hear them at night, the swish and smack and grunt, and see the bruises the next day, when a collar shifted or a sleeve rode up.

“When I was fourteen, I got a full scholarship to UHK, pilot program. A ship console’s not much different from the piano, really. Applied for parental emancipation the same day, walked out the door with what I had on, left all those little dresses behind in the closet. Never went back, never saw them again.”

Adra stretched her shoulders back, cracked her neck, folded her arms.

“Never had any regrets, either, but I know that after I left, Mother would be there alone with Father, and the beatings would never stop. So . . . worst thing.”

Crew was silent a beat. Yu and Cheung exchanged looks. Then Orit scraped her chair back. "Gotta pee." And Patel followed, and Keita and Barb hit the bar for another round.

Orit had her mouth at Nava's ear, whisper or tongue wasn't clear from Nava's sharp smile, and Deighton, mostly drunk, was asking Zandt something involved and disjointed about silicates. Perelman tapped the table, cleared his throat, a rumble like rocks falling, and said, "Adra. Second story."

Adra had gotten something new from the bar, clear and steaming. She took a sip, frowned, said, "Most painful? That's a difficult one. People let you down, and that never gets easier. But if I have to choose . . ."

"I was flying shuttles, back and forth between the CSG, the Centre Spatial Guyanais, and Laplace Station. Dumb work, dull work, but the sort of thing that looks right on your CV if you are shooting for an Outer System contract."

A nod from Yu.

"I had a lover downside, another upside, and switched one or the other out every few months, but I never felt," she stabbed a palm with a fingertip, "satiated. Like eating crisps when you're hungry. You fill your belly, but not your need. The problem was, I wasn't hungry, I was thirsty."

She took another sip, waved the glass; the liquid swirled but didn't spill.

"Maybe that's not a good analogy. Point is, I was looking for the wrong thing. Wasn't sex. *That* I can handle all on my own."

Chuckles, a scornful snort from Keita. Orit said, "Gotta give *me* a chance."

"It took Tanja to show me what it was I needed," Adra continued, "and then Tanja took it back."

"I met her on a trip upside. She was Nav, first year, on her way up to a contract doing freight runs out of Laplace. We had a spare seat in the cockpit, gave her a lift. Hit the bar, after, talked late, talked the whole shift through, so I had to do the downside run on no sleep. Before I left, she took my hand—she was a tiny thing, her fingers barely wrapped around mine—and she pressed it against her face. Pressed it hard; when she let go, my fingers had left pale streaks from jaw to ear. 'I'll be here, next time you're upside,' she said, and though she'd been smiling all night, she wasn't smiling then."

"That next trip, those first shifts together, you don't need to know the details. Here's what it was like, by the end. Here's what she took from me."

"I'd get to Laplace, go straight from the docking ring to meet her, some trendy bar or new-thing restaurant. I'd be in my flight overalls, and she'd always have on some perfect little dress, killer shoes, makeup so good it was invisible. How she maneuvered low-g in those shoes, I never knew."

"We'd talk, catch up on the gossip; those low-earth orbit routes, everyone knows everyone."

"Same out here," said Nava, with her sharp-edged smile.

Adra gave her a flat look. "We'd eat and drink and talk for a couple of hours, and the whole time Tanja would be working it. She knew exactly when to cross her legs, or brush her hair back, or lean low to adjust the strap of her shoe. She could focus it like a laser. It was never someone local. But Laplace is a busy place, and there was always some random person in transit. Not really random, though. She'd pick the sort we both despised; the Earther businessman, sweaty and pink and trying to hide his low-g hard-on, or a rich bitch from one of the orbital colonies, with those stupid balloon implants inflated as far as they'd go. I'd watch her watch them, like she was slicing them into millimeter slabs for scanning. Sometimes she'd take a hit of nano, tweak herself to match their need—she had a bigger selection in that tiny purse than most dealers—but mostly she could hook them without that tweak. She'd catch their eye, look away. That was all it took. They'd sit down at our table, or she'd slip

over to theirs, while I sat there unnoticed. She'd bought me this little switchblade in the Laplace gift shop; I'd carve little figures out of toothpicks, line them up like an audience to watch her work.

"At some point—there was never a signal, not that even I could tell—she'd just get up and walk out. The mark would sit there, waiting for her to return. If there was more than one of them, they'd joke about women and restrooms, or swap notes on her makeup. But after a while, they'd start to realize that she wasn't coming back. You could see it, like their faces were hollowing out from the back; then they'd crack, and then they'd crumble. I sat and watched for that moment, when their faces fell away and all that was left was an empty, shallow shell.

"Tanja would be waiting for me at my apartment, dress and shoes in a heap by the door, head down over the console I'd bought her. In that half hour since she'd gotten back from the bar, she'd have already hacked their personal accounts. Just that one conversation she'd had with them, their name, their business, maybe a glance at their phone while they were at the bar; that was all it took for Tanja to hack their lives as thoroughly as she had hacked their so-called personalities.

"We didn't steal from them, not money, anyway. Sometimes we'd delete a couple of photos, or a mailbox folder, something they wouldn't miss for months, then miss very, very much. Sometimes we'd copy a file or two; Tanja was growing some sort of crazy database of identities. And sometimes there was just nothing worth deleting and we'd add a file instead, so they'd know we'd been there, had seen everything they had and were.

"Sometimes we fucked, after; sometimes I'd tell her what a bad, bad girl she was and spank her; sometimes we just held each other. No matter what, though, after, I was full. Content. Finally, satisfied. Because what she did, the way she wrapped the marks up in their own emotions, laid their lives at my feet, showed them up as the empty shells they were, she did that for *me*.

"And then, one day, no signal, no tell, she just got up and walked. She'd been working *me* all night. We did that sometimes, pretended we were strangers, all part of the game. It was hot in the bar, and she was sweaty, pushy, rude. I turned to order another round, and when I turned back, she was gone. Waited in the damn room all shift, stayed there right through my next scheduled trip, and the next. Got a demerit for that in my flight record. She left me there, cracked and crumbled. Just another mark.

"She took the console, the dress and shoes she was wearing that night, left everything else. I still have her crap in a storage locker on Laplace.

"Before I met her, I was always needing something, but I didn't know what it was. After she left me, I knew what it was I needed. I just couldn't have it."

Adra looked around the table, ended on Cheung. "*That's* pain."

Orit said, "Second one's the lie. You're too lean to be a top, too strong." She traced a finger down Adra's arm. "Tops are weak."

And Patel waggled battered fingers, echoed, "Second's the lie."

But Yu shook her head, small, economical motions, that was Yu, and said, "First one's the lie. Her mother beat her, not her father, not the teacher. Beat the father, too, still does, if they're both still alive." Yu looked at Adra. "I know the type," she said.

It went around the table, then, skipping Adra, six votes against the first, four against the second, until it came to Zandt.

Zandt stared ahead, off over Cheung's shoulder, one long breath, two, then his head shifted, a huge effort to fight the inertia of that gaze, but it came around, ground to a stop on Perelman.

"What's the rule when both stories are lies?" Zandt asked.

Perelman raised a brow, dropped the corner of his mouth to counter. That was the look he used when a diagnostic came up wrong, onship, or a sensor pinged, unexpectedly.

"You call 'fault,'" Cheung answered.

Zandt swung that gaze over and down to the navigator. Cheung's eyes flicked up into it, and away again.

"Fault, then," Zandt said. "Both lies."

"Makes it six to four against the first, then," Nava said. She'd voted against the second. "We get it?"

Adra nodded, looked at Yu, looked into her glass. "It was Mother. She *was* my teacher. Beat my father, too, you got that right. He was weak, a fucking failure. Deserved it."

She shoved back from the table. "My round. Someone help carry."

A scrape and shuffle, some crew to the bar and some to the back, toilets and a stretching of legs gone stiff. Orit and Nava drifted to a dark corner, Nava's grin gleaming over Orit's shoulder.

Perelman and Cheung looked across the table at Zandt. Yu was standing by the window, looking out, but head turned, listening.

"Where was the lie?" Perelman asked.

"In the second story, he means," Cheung explained, watching his own fingers trace the rim of a glass. "What was it you heard?"

Zandt turned his head, stared at a spot on Cheung's chest. Finally, he said, "It was *all* false. Just a game to her. Stolen memories, appropriated emotions. Doesn't mean it. Doesn't *feel* it."

Yu said, apparently to the window, "There are words for that. Sociopath is one."

Perelman rumbled uncertainty. "A hard word, that."

Yu said, "She's still got those vials. Bootleg T.A.G. vectors. Hidden under a false bottom in her toiletries bag. The vials are labeled, things like 'laughing,' 'kneecap,' 'bimbo,' 'uncertainty,' 'play stupid.'"

"Should have come to me," Perelman said, a frown more hurt than angry.

"I just found out this morning, when we were getting prepped for shore leave. She didn't see me sitting there in the head. I can be quiet."

Perelman grunted.

"She unzipped the bottom of her bag, picked through the vials like she was choosing a shirt to wear. Guess she didn't find one that fit her mood; she finally put them all back. I figured out the false bottom while she was in the shower. One vial was almost empty. It was labeled 'trust.'"

"Trust her, or trust others?" Perelman asked. Yu was still looking out the window, so he turned to Cheung.

Whose fingers had pushed the clutter of mismatched bottles into a circle in the center of the table. "Trust the *crew*," Cheung said. "Don't have to be straight, under the ice. Don't have to be all the way . . . human, not in the Outer System. Just have to fit. The crew will know."

"Not all the way human," Yu echoed. She'd spread her fingers against the plexiglass as if she could hold the view in her hand. "The T.A.G. capture process uses viral systems based on European organisms. I've got that in me. Just having a backup at all, does that really leave us human?"

"More or less," Cheung said. Perelman blinked in confusion. Yu laughed softly, looked over her shoulder at the chatter of glass on glass.

Zandt had retrieved his glass from Cheung's circle—just tap water, he'd been drinking—and drained it. "Two years since the hack, since the Great Basin longstore was erased," he said. "So where does *that* leave you?"

"Here," Cheung said.

We tumbled back to the table, red and raucous. Deighton had his shirt off, was wringing it out. "What goes down must come up," Barb said, and Sintra added, "Man, he *spewed*."

Patel was sent to the corner with a glass of ice water to break up Orit and Nava, who spluttered and laughed and joined Deighton in the shirt-wringing.

Perelman tapped the table again. "Zandt."

Zandt was opposite Cheung and Adra, pinned between the window and the next table. Everyone shuffled their chairs, made him center.

"Twelve and Tag," Orit said, "I got—"

But Perelman rumbled right over her:

"Mass"

*Sintra:* "Moves, Thick"

*Cheung:* "Thigh, Sweet" (Orit and Nava elbow each other)

*Barb:* "Swung, Hung" (cheers)

*Patel:* "Head, Coil"

*Nava:* "Crown, Blunt" (a sharp look from Cheung)

*Orit:* "Brow"

And Adra, slumped in her chair, tagged it with: "Black."

Zandt looked at her for a long time, his eyes skin hair all a flat tarnished gold in the Jupiter-light. The crew was caught in that heavy silence, all except Cheung's fingers amongst the glasses.

"Don't know if this is worst, stupidest, most painful. Not sure it matters.

"Something I do know. I'm an addict. Don't use, haven't for twelve years, still an addict. Dad was, too, alcohol for him. Made it himself, like most out there in the Free State. Southern African Republic, part of the old South Africa, and the Boer State before that. Empty place.

"Had a sister, half-sister, Teeje, we called her. Teeje was five years younger, daughter of my stepmother. My mother died bearing me.

"Teeje was tiny, dark, like my stepmother, Indian, but she got her blood from my father. The *need*. Nano, with her. I could never stand it. Machines in your brain, tracing out someone else's memories. I wanted less to think about, not more.

"We'd found an outbuilding on the range, relay station for remote harvesters, made it our own, scavenged furniture, my music, Teeje's console, my bioprinter with the latest drug and her hacked nano. She'd be laughing, not even looking, it seemed, but the needle would slip in true and her head would go back and her laughter go deep and wild.

"Mrs. Van Zandt, we tried to stay out of her way, much as Dad would allow that. Which wasn't much. We lived in the main house, ate at the main table with them. 'They're mine,' he'd tell his wife. We were his like the house was his, like the land and the folks who worked it and Mrs. bloody Van Zandt. Teeje and I, we were a little more his than the rest, though. He'd had us T.A.G.ed, when I was thirteen and Teeje was just seven."

Nava interrupted with a snort. "Can't back up a kid." We groaned, and Orit punched her in the shoulder for bollixing the game. Nava did that sometimes, harpoonist reflexes. "It's in the U.N. neural rights charter," Nava grumbled.

But Cheung was shaking his head, an odd look on his face. "You can if you have enough money and the right connections. You can T.A.G. anyone you want, if you own the technology."

Yu nodded her small slow nod. "Van Zandt. VanZ Inc."

"Half the boats under the ice got a contract with VanZ," Perelman said.

Yu said, "VanZ is material science, nano, patents for smartcloth, adaptive armor. Weapons." She looked at Cheung. "T.A.G. tech."

Cheung was very still. "The Grand Basin longstore," he said.

"Not a lot of rules in the Free State," Zandt said. And when no one else interrupted, he continued.

"Dad was the only *Van Zandt*. We were just *Zandts*. And he had us, body and soul, and the souls locked away at Grand Basin out of reach. 'Forever.'

"Teeje was my sanity, all through those years. *She* was my soul. No matter how high she got, how out there, she was my center. Every moment we had away from the work, from my father, we were together. Out in our hideaway, out of our heads, out in one of those shared immersion games on her console. I'd just stagger around staring at the scenery and Teeje, she'd have hacked the environment, argyle skies and faces floating like clouds, staring back down at us like Dad did when we were little. Scare the crap out of the other players, she'd hack their accounts as well, put their own parents' faces up there too, or whatever would shake them hardest. She could hack people like she hacked machines.

"One day, I was eighteen, I came in from a two-day trip out mending fences, and she was gone. She'd left everything. Left me a note. Not going to tell you what it said. Guess this isn't 'most painful' I'm telling, because that was the most painful moment, then, and I am not yet done.

"I got her T.A.G.," Dad said. "Little bitch won't last long out there, and if she goes underground I'll have her declared dead. Then I restore a copy, and this copy I'll take special care of."

"Doesn't mean he wasn't furious. I was too big to beat, by that time, so he took it out on Mira, that was Teeje's mother. She left him, after that. We all did, eventually, steal our selves from him. Even if he had our souls."

A pause, then. Orit leaned into Nava's ear, but Nava stopped her with a hand, wrapped her arm around Orit's shoulders to hold her still.

"I stuck there another year and a half, got my certificate in soil science from the technical school, turned that into a scholarship in Capetown, three year program in mining, turned *that* into a research grant from a Outer System mining consortium. A year of study on Luna, then a free ticket *Out*, dust the Earth off my feet and never look back.

"Because I knew that's where Teeje would be. *Out*. She was always sure, always fearless, was what I thought. The way she could suck down other people's memories, she'd be hungry for her own. And she'd studied. We were teleschooled, and those hours in the outbuilding while I was listening to tunes and drifting, she'd have her tablet on her lap, out of her head into someone else's, but still studying. 'Learning is just hacking my own brain,' she'd say. 'Easy.' It was, for her.

"So, all that time in Capetown and Chicago, catching up with my classes, I was trying to catch up with *her*. She'd be pilot, or nav, something like that, university program or military. Only a couple of dozen schools on Earth do that sort of training, should have been easy to find her. Wasn't. I'd have figured she was dead, if it wasn't for the messages every few months. The whole family got them, and copies to the T.A.G. Board and the Free State court, but they were always addressed to Dad. Each one signed with a notarized DNA hash, each one untraceable, each one just a single word: 'alive.'"

Orit made a sound like a hiccup. Nava turned her head with a sharp look ready, saw Orit's face and wrapped her other arm around her instead.

"I was on Laplace station, on my way back to Luna after a seminar in Chicago. Walked into a dark, crowded bar, smaller, tighter than this place here . . ."

Zandt looked at Yu's shoulder, seeing something else.

"We shouldn't have been able to recognize each other. I was ten centimeters taller, wider, she was thinner, wouldn't have seemed possible, her dark skin gone that dull space-tan and bruises under the makeup. But I saw her, soon as I walked in there, I knew her, she knew me.

"I'd been right about the Nav degree. Wrong about the course. She was training under a corporate contract, slogging through it the slow way like I was.

"I was also wrong about the sure and fearless. She was strong, yeah, but it was our father's sort of strength, stubborn and thin. I'd quit the drugs when she'd left. *Was* no high without her. But she was still using, the new stuff coming out of Luna, synthetic memories, psychotic break in a bottle. I thought she'd be headed *Out*, but she was just going deeper in.

"She was using another way, too, using people, selling herself to afford the stuff. She'd done tricks, she told me, to get through training, but she'd found a better way, got herself a sugar-momma up on Laplace, all the money she needed, a place to crash. A place to use. It's stable, she said, it's safe, it's just like the outbuilding, back at home, and all it cost was bruises, a little blood. Just like back at home.

"Dad's blood, didn't just have the *need* in it, had the anger too. I shouted, called her a fool, called her *his daughter*, worst thing I knew how to say, told her she had to come with me, back to Luna, get clean. My company had open positions; *always* open positions for the Outer System. She'd come back to Luna with me, and then we'd go *Out* together.

"Stood there at the dock the next shift, sure I'd blown it, sure she wouldn't come. But she did. No suitcase, just a purse full of memory sticks, wearing a little black dress and useless shoes.

"First month on Luna, I thought things were good. She was in a program, detox, had paper signed with my company for work in the Belt once we got certified, not my same division but we'd be seeing each other once a month or so. She spent all her money on a new console, on a crazy expensive intersystem network node, but I was making enough to cover rent and food for us both.

"Came home early one shift, she was passed out on her console, needle in her hand. Set her in the shower, got her conscious, shouted at her. Kept my hands down, felt proud of myself for that. She was just a wisp you'd snap like that, hadn't been eating. I'd thought it'd been the detox but it was just the nano again.

"We shouted a while, and then we talked, and then we shouted again. 'I'm *using* it,' she kept saying. 'I'm almost in.' 'What "in"?' I said. 'We're going *Out*.' 'So go, Dad,' she said, and plugged into her console.

"Wasn't going to be my dad. *Wasn't*. So I put my hands in my pockets and I went.

"I found a place to crash by the shuttle port, food out of the vending machines and no booze, just a lot of thinking. Remembering those days in our hideaway back home. Remembering the sound of her laughter. Decided that's what I'd tell her, that I didn't own her, no one did. Tell her that all I wanted was to hear her laugh again, and anything else she did wasn't my business.

"Even after I figured that out, I didn't go back to the apartment, not right away. I went through what I was going to say, what she might say back, practiced until I was sure I could get it right, could handle anything she came back with without getting mad.

"It was almost three weeks later I went back to the apartment. April 7, 2084."

Yu said something too quiet for us to hear.

"Of course she wasn't there when I got back. Just her console. The display was flashing and I thought it might be a message for me. That's what I told myself, anyway, to justify plugging in and scrolling back through the history buffer. When I realized what I was seeing, I pulled the console apart and fed it a handful at a time into the garbage disposal."

Silence. Yu and Cheung exchanged a long, sad look. And then Cheung explained it for the rest of us. "That's the date of the hack on the Grand Basin longstore. Every T.A.G. in the system was scrambled beyond recovery."

Adra fumbled amongst the bottles, found one with something left in it and downed it, leaned back again, hands in pockets.

"Station security called while I was still sweeping up the pieces. They'd found her outside an airlock, no suit, just that little dress, those shoes. She'd made it two, three steps. *Out*."

Zandt straightened, a ponderous unfolding, his focus coming in from somewhere far to land straight across the table at Adra. "I booked a ticket back to Earth, to the Free State, but Dad was already dead by the time I got there. Massive stroke. Took that corporate contract then, been working Outer System ever since. Been searching again, too. Knew Teeje's new name by then, made it easier to track where she'd been. Korteweg, Tanja Korteweg. Teeje had found a way *Out* that I couldn't follow. Least I could do was track down her god *forever* damned sugar-momma from Laplace, the soulless sociopathic bitch who'd held the door open for her."

Everything hung. Yu stared at Adra. Nava held Orit. Cheung looked at Zandt and said "No."

Adra pushed back, pulled her hands out of her pockets. A flash of something in the Jupiter-light.

Zandt stood. His chair tipped, clattered against the table behind. A blur of steel, a *slap* of wood on flesh as he flipped his cane, grabbed it by the end. The table scraped forward as he leaned into it; glasses tipped, cracked, crashed to the floor.

The cane went up and around and down, a second when it looked like those dragon teeth would end up buried in Adra's temple, but Cheung had seen it coming, raised a hand. Fingers cracked, flapped, didn't stop the stick, no *way* to stop that stick. But he slowed it, and Adra shoved her long legs down and got a shoulder up. There was a wet *smack* of ligament displaced and skin torn, a hiss as if her breath had been forced out of her by the blow. She continued the motion, foot up on her chair, spiraling up and around. Her hip crunched glass as she came down across the table. There was a gleam as her fist connected with Zandt's ear, a meaty *scrunch*, and then Adra half-slid, half-rolled off the table and to her feet.

Zandt stood for a second, not volition but inertia. Then he toppled forward into the ruin of the table. A short black hilt protruded from his ear, a finger's width of steel switchblade.

A bottle hit the floor, rolled to a stop under the window.

Perelman was the only one still sitting. He looked at Adra, where she stood at the end of the table, arm hung limp at her side. "Leave," he said, "before station security arrives."

She stared at him, held up a bloody hand. "My arm, I need—"

"—to leave," Perelman said. "Europa. Jupiter. Go *Out* or *In*, nothing for you here anymore."

"Stories have a way of getting around," Nava said.

"It was self defense," she said.

But Perelman shook his head. Adra looked at the crew, one at a time, still trying to figure us out, us humans.

Cheung, broken fingers cradled fluttering against his chest, explained, almost gently, "You'd need someone to testify on your behalf."

"You'd need backup," Orit said, with what was almost a laugh.

Adra looked toward the bar; no one there returned her gaze. She nodded, then, blinked down at the body. "Fucked up as his sister. Must run in the blood."



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She turned toward the door, and didn't look back.

Nava picked slivers of glass off her shirt. "Gotta have words with the captain," she said. "He missed something there, hiring those two. Sure didn't want either of them on our crew."

Yu tilted her head, her own small shrug, and said, "Captain trusts us to catch the deep stuff. Why we're here."

Nods all around.

Looking down at Cheung's shattered hand, Yu added, "Can't catch everything, though. Sometimes you just have to get out of the way."

Cheung grimaced, shook his head. "I've tried that before and it didn't work. Anyway, she was crew, up until she pulled the knife."

Orit spread her fingers out over the body and said, "Too bad he didn't get to his second story."

Perelman got to his feet, shook his head, rumbled, "He did."

Nava said, "Stupidest, for sure."

And Cheung tagged it: "Fault. They were both true." ○

# NEXT ISSUE

## APRIL/MAY ISSUE

Our April/May 2015 double anniversary issue is another jam-packed edition of *Asimov's*. **Eugene Fischer's** cover story chronicles a pregnant reporter's investigation of a mysterious illness that has the potential to cause massive society upheaval and which will certainly engender repercussions for "The New Mother." We've managed to smush a second novella into the issue as well. Find out what the future holds for "The Children of Gal" in **Allen M. Steele's** riveting conclusion to his Arkwright series.

## ALSO IN APRIL/MAY

we have quite a Philadelphian contingency: **Michael Swanwick & Gregory Frost** warn it's best to "Lock Up Your Chickens and Daughters—H'ard and Andy Are Come to Town!"; **Tom Purdom** forecasts the future of the "Day Job"; and **Fran Wilde** shows us "How to Walk Through Historic Graveyards in the Post-Digital Age." British author **Liz Williams** takes a look at the bride's fate in "The Marriage of the Sea," while Australian author **Anna Tambour** creates an otherworldly clash in "The Gun Between the Veryush and the Cloud Mothers." **Jay O'Connell** weaves together "Willing Flesh"; new author **Frank Smith** finds that "The Sentry" is always on duty; **Joe M. McDermott** tells the poignant story of "Paul and His Son"; and **Robert Reed** takes stock of the Wow! signal in "What I Intend."

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg's** Reflections column considers whether "Praising or Banning" is best; **Norman Spinrad's** On Books examines "Schlock, Genre and Mainstream SF"; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our April/May issue on sale at newsstands on March 17, 2015. Or subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle and Kindle Fire, and *BarnesandNoble.com's* Nook, as well as from [magzter.com/magazines](http://magzter.com/magazines), Google Play, and Kobo's digital newsstand!

## COMING SOON

new stories by **Mary Robinette Kowal**, **Sarah Pinsker**, **Django Wexler**, **David Gerrold**, **Indrapramit Das**, **Sandra McDonald**, **M. Bennardo**, **Henry Lien**, **Rudy Rucker**, and many others!

# HOLDING THE GHOSTS

Gwendolyn Clare

**Gwendolyn Clare resides in North Carolina, where she tends a vegetable garden and a flock of backyard ducks. She has a PhD in mycology, which is useful for identifying wild mushrooms, but not for much else. Her short fiction has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* and *Clarkesworld*, among others. Her fourth appearance in *Asimov's* is an unusual take on the "coming-of-age" story.**

Abby was in control of the body the first time a glitch occurred. She was "home from college for the long weekend"—that's what the imprinted memories showed, at least—and her mother was pouring dollops of blueberry pancake batter onto the sizzling cast-iron griddle.

Her father had found an excuse to go into work on a Saturday morning, as he often did ever since Abby "went off to college." She assumed this was her father's strategy for coping with empty nest syndrome and tried not to feel hurt by his avoidance. Her interpretation wasn't entirely incorrect, but of course she did not comprehend exactly how empty the nest was.

When Abby stopped living with them full time, the body stopped being Abby full time. Leasing the body was quite expensive, so this was the only logical decision. But Abby's father could not reconcile himself to the idea that Abby only existed on the weekends when they rented the body, never mind that the techs would fabricate memories for her so that she believed she had experienced all the intervening days.

The body shouldn't have known this. The body should only know what Abby knew.

"Do you want another one? We've still got some batter here."

Abby looked up from the purple-and-amber swirls of blueberry juice and maple syrup she was prodding with her fork. "Um . . . no thanks, Mom. I think I'm full."

"I wish you wouldn't worry about the freshman fifteen," her mother fussed. "If anything, you look like you've lost a few pounds this semester."

"I'm not your daughter, you know. I'm just carrying her ghost for a while."

Abby's mother went very still. "What did you just say?"

Abby frowned and rubbed her temples, though it did little to alleviate the dull throbbing of her nascent headache. "Sorry, Mom. I don't know why I said that."

The doctors were not pleased. Abby's mother showed up at the facility, threatening to file a formal complaint if they didn't meet with her immediately. Words like "misrepresentation" and "breach of contract" were used.

Dr. Sankaran brought Abby's mother into a clean beige room with plush couches. Abby was not occupying the brain at that particular time, so the body could not respond to their arrival.

"Abby?" When she received no response, Abby's mother turned to the doctor and snapped, "What exactly is going on here?"

"Mrs. Whitfield, you reported that Abby's surrogate broke character, so I thought it would be informative to introduce you to the surrogate body. This," he said with a gesture, "is Baby Martinez."

The lips could not say hello, because Abby wasn't there to move them.

Abby's mother tentatively sat on the couch across from the body. She said, "They named her 'Baby'?"

"That's what they write on the birth certificate when the parents don't supply a name. Pacilam-affected infants are immediately identifiable at birth, and doctors usually discourage the parents from naming them. It's not healthy to develop an emotional attachment to a child who will live her entire life in a state of profound catatonia."

Abby's mother stared at the body. The body stared at nothing in particular.

Dr. Sankaran sat beside Abby's mother on the couch. "I know this might be disturbing, but I wanted you to see for yourself that Baby Martinez isn't self-aware. It has no consciousness, no affect. It records no long-term memories. It isn't a person, the way we understand personhood."

Abby's mother took the body's hand, turned it palm up, and held it between her own two hands. The body wondered how Abby would respond if she were in control. Being empty, the body did nothing.

"It's not that Baby Martinez *won't* respond to you," Dr. Sankaran said. "It's that she *can't*. For all intents and purposes, there is no Baby Martinez."

Abby's mother sighed and placed the body's hand back in its lap. "Then tell me, Doctor: why did Abby call herself a ghost?"

Chantal buried her toes in the sand and listened to the waves rolling in. She and John had been talking about a vacation in the Bahamas for years, but there were always obstacles—time, money, the kids, their respective careers. Now they were finally here together, free to relax and reconnect, but Chantal couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

Some days, a veil of *déjà vu* settled over her and stayed for hours, as if she'd lived every moment of the trip before. Other times, it felt as if there were traces of something unfamiliar smudged across her thoughts.

Twice she almost ordered shellfish, and John had to remind her she was allergic.

One morning she sat up in bed, wide awake, as if the paling eastern sky spoke to her as loud as an alarm clock. She wasn't usually an early riser. Moving quietly so as not to wake John, she padded across the pleasantly cool tiled floor of their villa and slid open the glass doors to let in the last of the nighttime cool. The smell of salt-water spray clung to the air, and a memory rose unbidden of skinny-dipping in the moonlight. Chantal couldn't recall when she'd done that—maybe only in a dream.

She looked back at the bed, at the sleep-slack face of the man she'd been married to for twenty-five years, and felt as if she were gazing upon a stranger. She closed the sliding door, rubbed her eyes, and firmly put away the memory or dream or whatever it was. This was her husband—her funny and kind and utterly familiar husband. This was her life she was living right now.

Chantal had never before felt that being herself required effort.

*Or did I feel this way the last time?* she thought, and then immediately wondered, *What last time?*

\* \* \*

A new client came for an initial consult. The body sat dutifully on the couch in the beige room.

"So this is the surrogate body you have available? She doesn't look much like the Maxine Roth I knew," said the client, a Mr. Ziegler.

"It won't matter," Dr. Sankaran assured him. "Our techs can modify Ms. Roth's self-perception so she doesn't notice the disparity."

Mr. Ziegler placed a finger beneath the body's chin and tilted it up, leaning in close to examine her. "But other than that, she'll be intact? Her knowledge, her cognitive abilities?"

Dr. Sankaran took a seat and balanced his tablet on one knee. "Our patented neuro-scanning process yields the highest degree of fidelity possible with modern medicine."

"You have to understand, we have a trade show in two months and our chief engineer is dead. Max was—I mean, *Ms. Roth* was literally the only person on the planet who understood all of the components involved in our products."

Maxine Roth must have been very smart. The body tried to imagine what it would be like to carry Maxine's ghost, but all it could envision was Abby and Chantal and the other old, familiar personalities. Chantal knew a great deal about ancient Near Eastern civilizations, and Abby liked marine biology, but the body had never held the ghost of an engineer before.

Dr. Sankaran was saying, "There is the small matter of Ms. Roth's brain still to be dealt with. The scanning process is destructive. If we move forward, she won't be eligible for cryo-preservation. You'll need written consent from her next of kin."

"Yes, yes, of course." Mr. Ziegler dismissed the concern with a wave of his hand. "It was all laid out in her employment contract, and the company's prepared to offer generous compensation if her next of kin have any objections."

Sankaran raised his eyebrows at that, but held his tongue.

"Don't give me that look," said Ziegler. "Do you have any idea how important this project is? Max's work is going to revolutionize remote presence technology."

The body considered this. Was being Abby important work? Or being Chantal? It gave their loved ones comfort, but it produced nothing tangible, and it didn't last. *I would like to do important work.*

Hold on. The body didn't know why it used that word: "I."

The body had never worked late before. What an odd sensation—passing through the drowsy pull of evening to a wide-eyed nocturnal alertness, as if the hindbrain was on watch against some ancient African predator. The hands had a slight tremor thanks to Max's fourth cup of coffee, which irked her as she tried to delicately manipulate the schematics holograph. She had spread out in the conference room at the end of the hallway, and the night seemed to seep in through the large-paned windows along the far wall.

Maxine was too engrossed in the design specs to notice, but the body heard footsteps behind it—dress shoes scuffing softly against the industrial carpet. A hand slid around the waist, and the body stiffened before Max had time to process that it was only Zieg.

"Don't touch me," Chantal said, pulling away from him. Max shook her head, disoriented. "I mean . . . we can't, you're married."

Zieg raised an eyebrow. "That's never stopped us before."

"I'm working late 'cause we've got a deadline looming," she replied, scowling. "Not so you can get a little something on the side."

He pulled away as if the words had been a slap. "We're all under pressure here, Max. You don't have to be such a moody bitch about it."

He turned around and stormed out, slamming the flimsy conference room door as he went. And *she* was the supposedly moody one?

Chantal wondered what she'd ever seen in him.

Max massaged her temples and wondered what was wrong with her.

*I have too many ghosts*, the body thought.

Max stared into her bathroom mirror. Same dark brown hair, same black-coffee irises, same low cheekbones and sharp, straight bridge of her nose. Max wasn't sure what she was looking for, and the body wondered what was happening to them. She ran her fingertips over her features, each detail seeming textbook accurate yet somehow leaving her with a hollow feeling. Max knew—with a dry, mechanical certainty—this was her face, but she couldn't seem to dredge up the proper emotive responses. Had teenage Max hated her eyebrows, or yearned for a lip piercing? She couldn't recall. Had she ever wished she were taller? Thinner? Prettier? She didn't know, and asking those questions felt like prodding a toothache only to find it inexplicably numb.

In Max's mind, the facts were there but none of the nuance. It was almost as if someone had programmed the memory of her face.

She rushed into the kitchen and went straight for the display screen built into the refrigerator door, which showed a layered montage of photos. The screen cleared with one sweep of her hand, and she began sorting through the images systematically, scrutinizing them one at a time.

First was her college roommate posing like Vanna White beside a conference poster. Then her Mechanical Engineering lab partners cramming themselves into the clown-car-sized solar vehicle they'd just finished for class. A whole sequence from the trip she took to Europe with her best friend after college: Shonda gazing up at the frescoed ceiling of the Melk Abbey church; Shonda eating real, fresh mussels straight from the shells; Shonda decked out in diving gear, ready to explore the Venice ruins.

The photos of Max's family were organized with less attention to the timeline of events. Her brother's wedding came before his twelfth birthday. Her parents hugged at Dad's retirement party. Then a younger version of her mother relaxed in the garden behind the house where she grew up—her red-haired, green-eyed mother.

Max scrolled through the photos faster and faster, a sense of unease seeding firmly in her gut. Among all the pictures, there wasn't a single image of herself. No embarrassing childhood candids, no drunken college selfies, no record of birthdays or graduations. The photos told a story of a life, but there was no evidence at all that Max had been present in it.

"No, no, no . . . please, no . . ." she muttered, rushing over to her messenger bag. She fished out her tablet before she remembered her apartment didn't have wireless, then let out a frustrated huff. "Seriously? An engineer who doesn't have a home network? Talk about a sloppy cover up."

It only took a minute to hack into her neighbor's network, and then she was scanning through the Palo Alto obituaries. There: Maxine Roth, thirty-one, died as a result of injuries . . . taken from us too soon . . . blah, blah. She slid the tablet away and slumped back in her chair.

The body felt swept away on a riptide of emotion, watching Max's grief and experiencing it, both observer and observed. *I'm so sorry*.

Max slowly rose and padded back to the bathroom mirror. She stared into the body's eyes. "Is there someone else in here with me?"

*Yes.*

"This . . . isn't my body."

*No.*

She paused. "What am I?"

*The ghost of Maxine Roth.*

We let out a sharp breath.

The intensity of Max's revelation is too much. Is there really only one mirror in the room, or are we looking at ourselves reflected back and forth, over and over, stretching to infinity? *I need Chantal—calm, practical, world-wise Chantal.*

Chantal breaks away from the mirror and runs her hands down the front of Max's button-up shirt, smoothing the wrinkles. Now that the cat's out of the bag, the question is, what to do next? She fishes around in Max's kitchen for a corkscrew and a bottle of red wine and pours herself a glass to steady her nerves while she considers the problem. Clearly something went wrong with the imprint process.

"No shit, Sherlock," Max interrupts. "The imprints are supposed to be completely wiped after each assignment."

"Well," Chantal says primly, "We can't go back to Dr. Sankaran. He'll just try to clean the slate a bit harder."

*Easier said than done. We're being monitored.*

Chantal carries the wine glass into Max's bedroom and sets it down on the nightstand. Reaching into the back of the closet, she pulls out Max's hiking backpack, then begins to methodically pack what we'll need. Layerable clothing in neutral colors so as not to draw attention, only the essential toiletries, a handful of valuables that can be pawned for untraceable credits.

She sips at the wine, finds a pair of scissors, and sculpts long bangs that hang in our face to obscure our features. After a moment of thought, she cuts the rest off at chin-length for good measure.

There's still the subdermal tracker to deal with. Chantal collects the first aid kit, a bottle of iodine, and Max's sharpest folding knife. She tips the wine glass back to get the last swallow, then sterilizes our forearm and the blade. Our knuckles turn white as she squeezes the knife grip with a grim determination.

"Let me," says Abby. When Chantal hesitates, she adds, "When was the last time *you* dissected something? I got an A in Physiology."

Holding the knife with steady fingers, Abby presses the tip into our forearm just below the tracking device. Pain, and a welling of blood, and then she deftly pops the tracker out. Abby applies a dollop of liquid bandage and blows on it to make it harden faster.

Max shoulders the knapsack, takes us out the back way into an alley behind her apartment complex, and steals her neighbor's Vespa.

We drive around for a while, taking random and sometimes reckless turns, to be certain the mobile monitoring team isn't following. No conspicuous black vans in our mirrors, though, so we abandon the scooter near Diridon Station. Stopping at a kiosk, I let Abby pick out a pair of sunglasses to throw off any facial recognition software, then I buy a ticket for the high-speed rail.

I borrow Abby's insouciant teenage slouch as I settle into the window seat and wait for the train to pull out. For the first time since Max discovered what I am, there is nothing to do but sit and ruminate.

How many times has John paid to relive that vacation to the Bahamas? Did Zieg scan Max's brain just for professional reasons, or something more? In the five years since Abby's death, how far have we strayed from her original self?

Is this Abby's attitude of casual disregard I'm disguising myself with, or is it really my own? For so long I was defined by the absence of Abby, the absence of Chantal, and now the lines between us are dissolving before my eyes.

The Max in me guesses that I must have forged unique neural pathways for recording and accessing long-term memory. That, without knowing it, I learned cognition and affect through mimicking the thought patterns of the ghosts. That a conscious self emerged as a consequence of needing to integrate these neural processes.

With Abby's sense of the ineffable, I wonder what good it does to understand how I happened. Clinical answers about my past can't tell me what I should do with my future. Chantal's practicality reassures me, though: I'll take this one careful step at a time.

I stand on the granite stoop and push the doorbell, and it feels strange to not have a key—to have to request entry into such a familiar place.

When Mrs. Whitfield opens the door, her mouth hangs open for a moment before she manages, "What are you— how—" and then, pleadingly, "... Abby?"

"Yes and no," I say. "May I come in?"

She holds the door open, watching me with anxious eyes. I set the backpack down in the entryway, by habit choosing the same place Abby used to throw hers down when she came home from school. Mrs. Whitfield sucks in a sharp breath, reminded of her daughter, and I immediately regret the too-familiar motion.

I smooth the front of my shirt, using Chantal's gesture for calming nerves. "I can't stay long," I say, "but I wanted you to hear it from me: I won't be available as a surrogate any longer. So this is goodbye."

She takes in my travel clothes, my haircut, my well-stuffed pack. I can tell by the widening of her eyes exactly when she realizes that I'm running from the people who used to own me. "You're ... stealing my daughter?"

I shake my head. "Death stole your daughter. Everything after that belongs to me as much as it does to you."

She presses her thumb into the palm of her other hand, as if trying to squeeze away her grief. "But you came here, you remember. You ... you're still imprinted with Abby."

"Yes." I look away, grasping for a way to explain. "I'm not Abby. Even in the early days, I was only ever a copy of Abby—but she did inspire me. Her ghost was the foundation upon which I built myself. So I'll always be grateful that you shared her with me, and I'll always carry a part of her. She lost her own life, but she gave me one."

"Oh, God," Abby's mother says, "so this is finally it." She takes a deep breath to steady the tremor in her voice. "What will you do now?"

I offer Chantal's soft, knowing smile. "I'm going to live." ○

He passes by the glass coffin,  
notes the silver  
in his hair, more wealth  
in his pocket, the offers  
have flooded in for his hand.

His latest wife newly dead,  
he seeks another,  
a princess as silent,  
as the executioner's block  
but younger.

No arguments that way.

—Jane Yolen

## Prince/Glass





# INHUMAN GARBAGE

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

**"Inhuman Garbage" is a standalone novella in Kristine Kathryn Rusch's bestselling Hugo-nominated Retrieval Artist series. Most of the novels in that series standalone as well, but with 2011's *Anniversary Day*, Kris started an in-series arc of eight novels, all about a major crisis on the Moon. *Blowback* came out in 2012. The remaining books will appear in 2015, starting in January with *A Murder of Clones*, and ending with *Masterminds* in June. The author also writes under pen names, including Kris Nelscott, whose latest novel *Street Justice* appeared in 2014. In addition, Kris also acts as series editor for the Fiction River anthologies.**

**D**etective Noelle DeRicci opened the top of the waste crate. The smell of rotting produce nearly hid the faint smell of urine and feces. A woman's body curled on top of the compost pile as if she had fallen asleep.

She hadn't, though. Her eyes were open.

DeRicci couldn't see any obvious cause of death. The woman's skin might have been copper colored when she was alive, but death had turned it sallow. Her hair was pulled back into a tight bun, undisturbed by whatever killed her. She wore a gray and tan pantsuit that seemed more practical than flattering.

DeRicci put the lid down and resisted the urge to remove her thin gloves. They itched. They always itched. Because she used department gloves rather than buying her own, and they never fit properly.

She rubbed her fingers together, as if something from the crate could have gotten through the gloves, and turned around. Nearly one hundred identical containers lined up behind it. More arrived hourly from all over Armstrong, the largest city on Earth's Moon.

The entire interior of the warehouse smelled faintly of organic material gone bad. She was only in one section of the warehouse. There were dozens of others, and at the end of each was a conveyor belt that took the waste crates, mulched them, and then sent the material for use in the Growing Pits outside Armstrong's dome.

The crates were cleaned in a completely different section of the warehouse, and then sent back into the city for reuse.

Not every business recycled its organic refuse for the Growing Pits, but almost all of the restaurants and half of the grocery stores did. DeRicci's apartment building sent organic food waste into bins that came here as well.

The owner of the warehouse, Najib Ansel, stood next to the nearest row of crates. He wore a blue smock over matching blue trousers, and blue booties on his feet. Blue gloves stuck out of his pocket, and a blue mask hung around his neck.

"How did you find her?" DeRicci asked.

Ansel nodded at the ray of blue light that hovered above the crate, then toed the floor.

"The weight was off," he said. "The crate was too heavy."

DeRicci looked down.

"I take it you have sensors in the floor?" she asked.

"Along the orange line."

She didn't see an orange line. She moved slightly, then saw it. It really wasn't a line, more a series of orange rectangles, long enough to hold the crates, and too short to measure anything beside them.

"So you just lifted the lid . . ." DeRicci started.

"No, sir," Ansel said, using the traditional honorific for someone with more authority.

DeRicci wasn't sure why she had more authority. She had looked him up on her way here. He owned a multimillion-dollar industry, which made its fortune charging for waste removal from the city itself, and then reselling that waste at a low price to the Growing Pits. She had known this business existed, but she hadn't paid a lot of attention to it until an hour ago. She had felt a shock of recognition when she saw the name of the business in the download that sent her here: Ansel Management was scrawled on the side of every waste container in every recycling room in the city.

Najib Ansel had a near monopoly in Armstrong, and had warehouses in six other domed communities. According to her admittedly cursory research, he had filed for permits to work in two new communities just this week. So the fact that he was in standard worker gear, just like his employees, amazed her. She would have thought a mogul like Ansel would be in a gigantic office somewhere making deals, rather than standing on the floor of the main warehouse just outside Armstrong's dome.

Even though he used the honorific, he didn't say anything more. Clearly, Ansel was going to make her work for information.

"Okay," DeRicci said. "The crate was too heavy. Then what?"

"Then we activated the sensors, to see what was inside the crate." He looked up at the blue light again. Obviously that was the sensor.

"Show me how that works," she said.

He rubbed his fingers together—probably activating some kind of chip. The light came down and broadened, enveloping the crate. Information flowed above it, mostly in chemical compounds and other numbers. She was amazed she recognized that the symbols were compounds. She wondered where she had picked that up.

"No visuals?" she asked.

"Not right away." He reached up to the holographic display. The numbers kept scrolling. "You see, there's really nothing out of the ordinary here. Even her clothes must be made of some kind of organic material. So my people couldn't figure out what was causing the extra weight."

"You didn't find this, then?" she asked.

"No, sir," he said.

"I'd like to talk with the person who did," she said.

"She's over there." He nodded toward a small room off to the side of the crates.

DeRicci suppressed a sigh. Of course he cleared the employee off the floor. Anything to make a cop's job harder. "All right," she said, not trying to hide her annoyance. "How did your 'people' discover the extra weight?"

"When the numbers didn't show anything," he said, "they had the system scan for a large piece. Sometimes, when crates come in from the dome, someone dumps something directly into the crate without paying attention to weight and size restrictions."

Those were hard to ignore. DeRicci vividly remembered the first time she'd tried to put something of the wrong size into a recycling crate. She'd dumped a rotted roast she had never managed to cook (back in the days when she actually believed she could cook). She'd placed it into the crate behind her then-apartment building. The damn crate beeped at her, and when she didn't remove the roast fast enough for the stupid thing, it had actually started to yell at her, telling her that she wasn't following the rules. There was a way to turn off the alarms, but she and her building superintendant hadn't known it. Clearly, someone else had.

"So," DeRicci said, "the system scanned, and . . . ?"

"Registered something larger," he said somewhat primly. "That's when my people switched the information feed to visual, and got the surprise of their lives."

She would wager. She wondered if they thought the woman was sleeping. She wasn't going to ask him that question; she'd save it for the person who actually found the body. "When did they call you?" she asked.

"After they visually confirmed the body," he said.

"Meaning what?" she asked. "They saw it on the feed or they actually lifted the lid?"

"On the feed," he said.

"Where was this?" she asked.

He pointed to a small booth that hovered over the floor. The booth clearly operated on the same tech that the flying cars in Armstrong used. The booth was smaller than the average car, however, and was clear on all four sides. Only the bottom appeared to have some kind of structure, probably to hide all the mechanics.

"Is someone in the booth?" she asked.

"We always have someone monitoring the floor," he said, "but I put someone new up there, so that the team that discovered the body can talk to you."

DeRicci supposed he had put the entire team in one room, together, so that they could align their stories. But she didn't say anything like that. No sense antagonizing Ansel. He was helping her. "We're going to need to shut down this part of your line," she said. "Everything in this part of the warehouse will need to be examined."

To her surprise, he didn't protest. Of course, if he had protested, she would have had him shut down the entire warehouse. Maybe he had dealt with the police before.

"So," she said, "who actually opened the lid on this container?"

"I did," he said quietly.

She hadn't expected that. "Tell me about it."

"The staff contacted me after they saw the body."

"On your links?" she asked. Everyone had internal links for communication, and the links could be set up with varying degrees of privacy. She would wager that the entire communication system inside Ansel Management was on its own dedicated link.

"Yes," he said. "The staff contacted me on my company link."

"I'd like to have copies of that contact," she said.

"Sure." He wasn't acting like someone who had anything to hide. In fact, he was acting like someone who had been through this before.

"What did your staff tell you?" she asked.

His lips turned upward. Someone might have called that expression a smile, but it wasn't. It was rueful. "They told me that there was a woman in crate A1865."

DeRicci made a mental note about the number. Before this investigation was over, she'd learn everything about this operation, from the crate numbering system to the way that the conveyor worked to the actual mulching process. "That's what they said?" she asked. "A woman in the crate?"

"Crate A1865," he repeated, as if he wanted that detail to be exactly right.

"What did you think when you heard that?" DeRicci asked.

He shook his head, then sighed. "I—we've had this happen before, Detective. Not for more than a year, but we've found bodies. Usually homeless people in the crates near the Port, people who came into Armstrong and can't get out. Sometimes we get an alien or two sleeping in the crates. The Oranjanie view rotting produce as a luxury, and they look human from some angles."

The Port of Armstrong was the main spaceport onto the Moon, and also functioned as the gateway to Earth. Member species of the Earth Alliance had to stop in Armstrong first before traveling to Earth. Some travelers never made it into Earth's protected zone, and got stuck on the Moon itself.

Right now, however, she had no reason to suspect alien involvement in this crime. She preferred working human-on-human crime. It made the investigation so much easier.

"You've found human bodies in your crates before," she clarified.

"Yeah," he said.

"And the police have investigated?"

"All of the bodies, alien and human," he said. "Different precincts, usually, and different time periods. My grandmother started this business over a hundred years ago. She found bodies even way back then."

DeRicci guessed that someone would think it made sense to hide a body in one of the crates.

"Do you believe that bodies have gotten through the mulching process?" It took her a lot of strength not to look at the conveyer belt as she asked that question.

"I don't think a lot got through," he said. "I know some did. Back in my grandmother's day. She's the one who set up the safeguards. We might have had a few glitches after the safeguards were in place, before we knew how well they worked, but I can guarantee nothing has gone through since I started managing this company twenty-five years ago."

DeRicci tried not to shudder as she thought about human flesh serving as compost at the Growing Pits. She hated Moon-grown food, and she had a hunch she was going to hate it more after this case.

But she had to keep asking questions.

"You said you can guarantee it," she repeated.

He nodded.

"What if someone cut up the body?" she asked.

He grimaced. "The pieces would have to be small to get past our weight and size restrictions. Forgive me for being graphic, but no full arms or legs or torsos or heads. Maybe fingers and toes. We have nanoprobes on these things, looking for human DNA. But the probes are coating the lining of the crates. If someone buried a finger in the middle of some rotting lettuce, we might miss it."

She turned so that he wouldn't see her reaction. She forced herself to swallow some bile back, and wished she had some savings. She wanted to go home and purge her refrigerator of anything grown on the Moon, and buy expensive Earth-grown produce.

But she couldn't afford that, not on a detective's salary.

"Fair enough," she said, surprised she could sound so calm when she was so thoroughly grossed out. "No full bodies have gone through in at least twenty-five years. But you've seen quite a few. How many?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'd have to check the records."

That surprised her. It meant there were enough that he couldn't keep track. "Any place where they show up the most often?"

"The Port," he said. "There's a lot of homeless in that neighborhood."

Technically, they weren't homeless. They were people who lived on the city's charity. A lot of small cubicle sized rooms existed on the Port blocks, and anyone who couldn't afford their own home or ended up stranded and unemployable in the city could stay in one of the cubicles for six months, no questions asked.

After six months, they needed to move to long-term city services, which were housed elsewhere. She wanted to ask if anyone had turned up in those neighborhoods, but she'd do that after she looked at his records.

"I'm confused," she said. "Do these people crawl into the crates and die?" The crate didn't look like it was sealed so tightly that the person couldn't get oxygen.

"Some of them," he said. "They're usually high or drunk."

"And the rest?" she asked.

"Obviously someone has put them there," he said.

"A different someone each time, I assume," she said.

He shrugged. "I let the police investigate. I don't ask questions."

"You don't ask questions about dead people in your crates?"

His face flushed. She had finally gotten to him.

"Believe it or not, Detective," he snapped, "I don't like to think about it. I'm very proud of this business. We provide a service that enables the cities on the Moon to not only have food, but to have *great* food. Sometimes our system gets fouled up by crazy people, and I *hate* that. We've gone to great lengths to prevent it. That's why you're here. Because our systems *work*."

"I didn't mean to offend you," she lied. "This is all new to me, so I'm going to ask some very ignorant questions at times."

He looked annoyed, but he nodded.

"What part of town did this crate come from?" she asked.

"The Port," he said tiredly.

She should have expected that, after he had mentioned the Port a few times.

"Was the body in the crate when it was picked up at the Port?" she asked.

"The weight was the same from Port to here," he said. "Weight gets recorded at pick-up, but flagged near the conveyer. The entire system is automated until the crates get to the warehouse. Besides, we don't have the ability to investigate anything inside Armstrong. There are a lot of regulations on objects that are considered garbage inside the dome. If we violate those, we'll get black marks against our license, and if we get too many black marks in a year, we could lose that license."

More stuff she didn't know. City stuff, regulatory stuff. The kinds of things she always ignored. And things she would probably have to investigate now.

"Do you know her?" DeRicci asked, hoping to catch him off balance.

"Her?" He looked confused for a moment. Then he looked at the crate, and his flush grew deeper. "You mean, *her*?"

"Yes," DeRicci said. Just from his reaction she knew his response. He didn't know the woman. And the idea that she was inside one of his crates upset him more than he wanted to say. Which was probably why he was the person talking to DeRicci now.

"No," he said. "I don't know her, and I don't recognize her. We didn't run any recognition programs on her either. We figured you all would do that."

"No one touched her? No one checked her for identification chips?"

"I'm the one who opened the crate," he said. "I saw her, I saw that her eyes were open, and then I closed the lid. I leave the identifying to you all."

"Do you know all your employees, Mr. Ansel?"

"By name," he said.

"By look," she said.

He shook his head. "I have nearly three hundred employees in Armstrong alone."

"But you just said you know their names. You know all three hundred employees by name?"

He smiled absently, which seemed like a rote response. He'd responded to this kind of thing before.

"I have an eidetic memory," he said. "If I've seen a name, then I remember it."

"An eidetic memory for names, but not faces? I've never heard of that," DeRicci said.

"I haven't met all of my employees," he said. "But I go over the pay amounts every week before they get sent to the employees' accounts. I see the names. I rarely see the faces."

"So you wouldn't know if she worked here," DeRicci said.

"Here?" he asked. "Here I would know. I come here every day. If she worked in one of the other warehouses or in transport or in sales, I wouldn't know that."

"Did this crate go somewhere else before coming to this warehouse?" DeRicci asked.

"No," Ansel said. "Each crate is assigned a number. That number puts it in a location, and then when the crate fills, it gets swapped out with another. The crate comes to the same warehouse each time, without deviation. And since that system is automated, as I mentioned, I know that it doesn't go awry."

"Can someone stop the crate in transit and add a body?"

"No," he said. "I can show you if you want."

She shook her head. That would be a good job for her partner, Rayvon Lake. Rayvon still hadn't arrived, the bastard. DeRicci would have to report him pretty soon. He had gotten very lax about crime scenes, leaving them to her. He left most everything to her, and she hated it.

He was a lazy detective—twenty years in the position—and he saw her as an upstart who needed to be put in her place. She wouldn't have minded if he did his job. Well, that wasn't exactly true. She would have minded. She hated people who disliked her. But she wouldn't be considering filing a report on him if he actually did the work he was supposed to do.

She would get Lake to handle the transport information by telling him she wasn't smart enough to understand it. It would mean that she'd have to suffer through an explanation later in the case, but maybe by then she'd either have this thing solved or she'd have a new partner. A woman could hope, after all.

"One of the other detectives will look into the transport process," DeRicci said. "I'm just trying to cover the basics here, so we start looking in the right place. Can outsiders come into this warehouse?"

"And get into one of our crates?" Ansel asked. "No. Look."

He touched the edge of the lid, and she heard a loud snap.

"It's sealed shut now," he said.

She didn't like the sound of that snap.

"If I were in there," she asked, "could I breathe through that seal?"

"Yes," he said. "For about two days, if need be. But it doesn't seal shut like that until it leaves the transport and crosses the threshold here at the warehouse. So there's no way anyone could crawl in here at the warehouse."

"All right," DeRicci said. "So, let me be sure I understand you. The only place that someone could either place a body into a crate or crawl into it on their own is on site."

"Yes," Ansel said. "We try to encourage composting, so we allow bypassers to stuff something into a crate. We search for non-organic material at the site, and flag the crates with non-organic material so they can be cleaned."

"Clothing is organic?" DeRicci asked.

"Much of it, yes," Ansel said. "Synthetics aren't good hosts for nanoproductions, so most people wear clothing made from recycled organic material."

DeRicci's skin literally crawled. She hadn't known that. She wasn't an organic kind of woman. She preferred fake stuff, much to the dismay of her friends.

"All right," she said. "I'm going to talk with your people in a minute. I'll want to know what they know. And I'll need to see your records on previous incidents."

She didn't check to see if he had sent her anything on her links. She didn't want downloads to confuse her sense of the crime scene. She liked to form her own opinions, and she did that by being thorough.

Detectives like Rayvon Lake gathered as much information as possible, multi-tasking as they walked through a crime scene. She believed they missed most of the important details while doing that, and that led to a lot of side roads and wasted time. And, if she could prove it (if she had time to prove it), a lot of false convictions. She had caught Lake twice trying to close a case by accusing an innocent person who was convenient, rather than doing the hard legwork required of a good investigator.

Ansel fluttered near her for a moment. She inclined her head toward the room where the staff had gathered, knowing she was inviting him to contaminate her witnesses even more, but she had a hunch none of them were going to be useful to the investigation anyway. "Before you go," she said, just in case he didn't take the hint, "could you unseal this crate for me?"

"Oh, yes, sorry," he said, and ran his fingers along the side again. It snapped one more time, then popped up slightly.

DeRicci thanked him, and pulled back the lid. The crate was deep—up to DeRicci's ribs—and filled with unidentifiable bits of rotting food. The woman lay on top of them, hands cradled under her cheek, feet tucked together. DeRicci couldn't imagine anyone just curling up here, even at the bidding of someone else. But people did strange things for strange reasons, and she wasn't going to rule it out.

She put the lid down and then looked at the warehouse again. She would need the numbers, but she suspected thousands of crates went through Ansel's facilities around the Moon daily. Done properly, the crates would be a perfect way to dispose of bodies and all kinds of other things that no one wanted to see. She wondered how many others knew about this facility and how it worked.

She suspected she would have to find out.

Getting the crime scene unit to a warehouse outside of the dome took more work than Ethan Brodner liked to do. Fortunately, he was a deputy coroner, which meant he couldn't control the crime scene unit. Someone with more seniority had to handle requisitioning the right vehicle from the police department yards outside the dome, and making certain the team had the right equipment.

Brodner came to the warehouse via train. The ride was only five minutes long, but it made him nervous. He was born inside the dome, and he hated leaving it for any reason at all, especially for a reason involving work. So much of his work had to do with temperature and conditions, and if the body had been in an airless environment at all, it had an impact on every aspect of his job.

He was relieved when he arrived at the warehouse and learned that the body had never gone outside of an Earth Normal environment. However, he was annoyed to see that he would be working with Noelle DeRicci. She was notoriously difficult and demanding, and often asked coroners to redo something or double-check their findings. She'd caught him in several mistakes, which he found embarrassing. Then she had had the gall to tell him that he should probably double-check all of his work, considering its shoddy quality.

She stood next to a crate, the only one of thousands that was open. She was rumpled—she was always rumpled—and her curly black hair looked messier than usual.

When she saw him approach, she glared at him.

"Oh, lucky me," she said.

Broduer bit back a response. He'd been recording everything since he got off the train inside the warehouse's private platform, and he didn't want to show any animosity toward DeRicci on anything that might go to court.

"Just show me the body and I'll get to work," he said.

She raised her eyebrows at the word "work," and she didn't have to add anything to convey her meaning. She didn't think Broduer worked at all.

"My biggest priority at the moment is an identification," DeRicci said.

And his biggest priority was to do this investigation right. But he didn't say that. Instead he looked at the dozens of crates spread out before him. "Which one am I dealing with?" he asked, pleased that he could sound so calm in the face of her rudeness.

She placed a hand on the crate behind her. He was pleased to see that she wore gloves. He had worked with her partner Rayvon Lake before, and Lake had to be reminded to follow any kind of procedure. But Broduer didn't see Lake anywhere.

"Have you had cases involving the waste crates before?" DeRicci asked Broduer.

"No," he said, not adding that he tried to pass anything outside the dome on to anyone else, "but I've heard about cases involving them. I guess they're not that uncommon."

"Hmm," she said looking toward a room at the far end of the large warehouse. "And here I thought they were."

Broduer was going to argue his point when he realized that DeRicci wasn't talking to him now. She was arguing with someone she had already spoken to.

"Can you get me information on that?" DeRicci asked Broduer.

He hated it when detectives wanted him to do their work for them. "It's in the records."

DeRicci made a low, growly sound, like he had irritated her beyond measure.

So he decided to tweak her a bit more. "Just search for warehouses and recycling and crates—"

"I know," she said. "I was hoping your office already had statistics."

"I'm sure we do, Detective," he said, moving past her, "but you want me to figure out what killed this poor creature, right? Not dig into old cases."

"I think the old cases might be relevant," she said.

He shrugged. He didn't care what was or wasn't relevant to her investigation. His priority was dealing with this body. "Excuse me," he said, and slipped on his favorite pair of gloves. Then he raised the lid on the crate.

The woman inside was maybe thirty. She had been pretty, too, before her eyes had filmed over and her cheeks sunk in. She had clearly died in an Earth Normal environment, and she hadn't left that environment, as advertised. He would have to do some research to figure out if the presence of rotting food had an impact on the body's decomposition, but that was something to worry about later.

Then Broduer glanced up. "I'll have information for you in a while," he said to DeRicci.

"Just give me a name," she said. "We haven't traced anything."

He didn't want to move the body yet. He didn't even want to touch it, because he was afraid of disturbing some important evidence.

The corpse's hands were tucked under her head, so he couldn't just run the identification chips everyone had buried in their palms. He used the coroner's office facial recognition program instead. It had a record of every single human who lived in Armstrong, and was constantly updated with information from the arrivals and departures sections of the city every single day.

"Initial results show that her name is Sonja Mycenae. She was born here, and moved off-Moon with her family ten years ago. She returned last month to work as a nanny for . . ."



He paused, stunned at the name that turned up.

"For?" DeRicci pushed.

Broduer looked up. He could feel the color draining from his face.

"Luc Deshin," he said quietly. "She works for Luc Deshin."

Luc Deshin.

DeRicci hadn't expected that name.

Luc Deshin ran a corporation called Deshin Enterprises that the police department flagged and monitored continually. Everyone in Armstrong knew that Deshin controlled a huge crime syndicate that trafficked in all sorts of illegal and banned substances. The bulk of Deshin's business had moved off-Moon, but he had gotten his start as an average street thug, rising, as those kids often do, through murder and targeted assassination into a position of power, using the deaths of others to advance his own career.

"Luc Deshin needed a nanny?" DeRicci sounded confused.

"He married a few years ago," Broduer said, as he bent over the body again. "I guess they had kids."

"And didn't like the nanny?" DeRicci whistled. "Talk about a high stress job."

She glanced at that room filled with the employees who'd found the body. There was a lot of work to be done here, but none of it was as important as catching Deshin by surprise with this investigation. If he'd killed this Sonja Mycenae, then he would be expecting the police's appearance. But he might not expect them so soon.

Or maybe he had always used the waste crates to dump his bodies. No one had ever been able to pin a murder on him. Perhaps this was why.

She needed to leave. But before she did, she sent a message to Lake. Only she sent it using the standard police links, not the encoded link any other officer would use with her partner. She wanted it on record that Lake hadn't shown up yet.

*Rayvon, you need to get here ASAP. There are employees to interview. I'm following a lead, but someone has to supervise the crime scene unit. Deputy Coroner Broduer is here, but he doesn't have supervisory authority.*

She didn't wait for Lake's response. Before he said anything, she sent another message to her immediate supervisor, Chief of Detectives Andrea Gumiela, this time through an encoded private link.

*This case has ties to Deshin Enterprises, DeRicci sent. I'm going there now, but we need a good team on this. It's not some random death. It needs to be done perfectly. Between Broduer and Lake, we're off to a bad start.*

She didn't wait for Gumiela to respond either. In fact, after sending that message, DeRicci shut off all but her emergency links. She didn't want Gumiela to tell her to stay on site, and she didn't want to hear Lake's invective when he realized she had essentially chastised him in front of the entire department.

"Make sure no one leaves," DeRicci said to Broduer.

He looked up, panicked. "I don't have the authority."

"Pretend," she snapped, and walked away from him.

She needed to get to Luc Deshin, and she needed to get to him now.

Luc Deshin grabbed his long-waisted overcoat and headed down the stairs. So a police detective wanted to meet with him. He wished he found such events unusual. But they weren't. The police liked to harass him. Less now than in the past. They'd had a frustrating time pinning anything on him.

He always found it ironic that the crimes they accused him of were crimes he'd never think of committing, and the crimes he had committed—long ago and far away—were crimes they had never heard of. Now, all of his activities were legal. Just-inside-the-law legal, but legal nonetheless. Or so his cadre of lawyers kept

telling the local courts, and the local judges—at least the ones he would find himself in front of—always believed his lawyers.

So, a meeting like this, coming in the middle of the day, was an annoyance, and nothing more.

He used his trip down the stairs to stay in shape. His office was a penthouse on the top floor of the building he'd built to house Deshin Enterprises years ago. He used to love that office, but he liked it less since he and his wife Gerda brought a baby into their lives.

He smiled at the thought of Paavo. They had adopted him—sort of. They had drawn up some legal papers and wills that the lawyers assured him would stand any challenge should he and Gerda die suddenly. But Deshin and Gerda had decided against an actual adoption given Deshin's business practices and his reputation in Armstrong. They were worried that some judge would deem them unfit, based on Deshin's reputation.

Plus, Paavo was the child of two Disappeareds, making the adoption situation even more difficult. The Earth Alliance's insistence that local laws prevailed when crimes were committed meant that humans were often subjected to alien laws, laws that made no sense at all. Many humans didn't like being forced to lose a limb as punishment for chopping down an exotic tree, or giving up a child because they'd broken food laws on a different planet. Those who could afford to get new names and new identities did so rather than accept their punishment under Earth Alliance law. Those people Disappeared.

Paavo's parents had Disappeared within weeks of his birth, leaving him to face whatever legal threat those aliens could dream up.

Paavo, alone, at four months.

Fortunately, Deshin and Gerda had sources inside Armstrong's family services, which they had cultivated for just this sort of reason. Both Deshin and Gerda had had difficult childhoods—to say the least. They knew what it was like to be unwanted.

Their initial plan had been to bring several unwanted children into their home, but after they met Paavo, a brilliant baby with his own special needs, they decided to put that plan on hold. If they could only save Paavo, that would be enough.

But they were just a month into life with the baby, and they knew that any more children would take a focus that, at the moment at least, Paavo's needs wouldn't allow.

Deshin reached the bottom of the stairwell, ran a hand through his hair, and then walked through the double doors. His staff kept the detective in the lobby.

She was immediately obvious, even though she wasn't in uniform. A slightly disheveled woman with curly black hair and a sharp, intelligent face, she wasn't looking around like she was supposed to. Most new visitors to Deshin Enterprises either pretended to be unimpressed with the real marble floors, the imported wood paneling, and the artwork that constantly shifted on the walls and ceiling. Or the visitors gaped openly at all of it.

This detective did neither. Instead, she scanned the people in the lobby—all staff, all there to guard him and keep an eye on her.

She would be difficult. He could tell that just from her body language. He wasn't used to dealing with someone from the Armstrong Police Department who was intelligent *and* difficult to impress.

He walked toward her, and as he reached her, he extended his hand. "Detective," he said warmly. "I'm Luc Deshin."

She wiped her hands on her stained shirt, and just as he thought she was going to take his hand in greeting, she shoved hers into the pockets of her ill-fitting black pants.

"I know who you are," she said.

She deliberately failed to introduce herself, probably as a power play. He could play back, ask to see the badge chip embedded in the palm of her hand, but he didn't feel like playing. She had already wasted enough of his time.

So he took her name, Noelle DeRicci, from the building's security records, and declined to look at her service record. He had it if he needed it.

"What can I do for you then, Detective?" He was going to charm her, even if that took a bit of strength to ignore the games.

"I'd like to speak somewhere private," she said.

He smiled. "No one is near us, and we have no recording devices in this part of the lobby. If you like, we can go outside. There's a lovely coffee shop across the street."

Her eyes narrowed. He watched her think: did she ask to go to his office and get denied, or did she just play along?

"The privacy is for you," she said, "but okay . . ."

She sounded dubious, a nice little trick. A less secure man would then invite her into the office. Deshin waited. He'd learned that middle managers—and that was what detectives truly were—always felt the press of time. He never had enough time for anything and yet, as the head of his own corporation, he also had all the time in the universe.

"I'm here about Sonja Mycenae," she said.

Sonja. The nanny he had fired just that morning. Well, fired wasn't an accurate term. He had deliberately avoided firing her. He had eliminated her position.

He and Gerda had decided that Sonja wasn't affectionate enough toward their son. In fact, she had seemed a bit cold toward him. And once Deshin and Gerda started that conversation about Sonja's attitudes, they realized they didn't like having someone visit their home every day, and they didn't like giving up any time with Paavo.

Both Gerda and Deshin had worried, due to their backgrounds, that they wouldn't know how to nurture a baby; Sonja had taught them that training mattered a lot less than actual love.

"I understand she works for you," the detective said.

"She worked for me," he said.

Something changed in the detective's face. Something small. He felt uneasy for the first time.

"Tell me what this is about, Detective," he said.

"It's about Sonja Mycenae," she repeated.

"Yes, you said that. What exactly has she done?" he asked.

"Why don't you tell me why she no longer works for you," the detective said.

"My wife and I decided that we didn't need a nanny for our son. I called Sonja to the office this morning, and let her know that, effective immediately, her employment was terminated through no fault of her own."

"Do you have footage of that conversation?" the detective asked.

"I do, and it's protected. You'll need permission from both of us or a warrant before I can give it to you."

The detective raised her eyebrows. "I'm sure you can forgo the formalities, Mr. Deshin."

"I'm sure that many people do, Detective," he said, "however, it's my understanding that an employee's records are confidential. You may get a warrant if you like. Otherwise, I'm going to protect Sonja's privacy."

"Why would you do that, Mr. Deshin?"

"Believe it or not, I follow the rules." He managed to say that without sarcasm.

The detective grunted as if she didn't believe him. "What made you decide to terminate her position today?"

"I told you," Deshin said, keeping his voice bland even though he was getting annoyed. "My wife and I decided we didn't need a nanny to help us raise our son."

"You might want to share that footage with me without wasting time on a warrant, Mr. Deshin," the detective said.

"Why would I do that, Detective? I'm not even sure why you're asking about Sonja. What has she done?"

"She has died, Mr. Deshin."

The words hung between them. He frowned. The detective had finally caught him off guard. For the first time, he did not know how to respond. He probably needed one of his lawyers here. Any time his name came up in an investigation, he was automatically the first suspect. But in this case, he had nothing to do with Sonja's death. So he would act accordingly, and let the lawyers handle the mess.

"What happened?" he asked softly.

He had known Sonja since she was a child. She was the daughter of a friend. That was one of the many reasons he had hired her, because he knew her.

Even then, she hadn't turned out as expected. He remembered an affectionate, happy girl. The nanny who had come to his house didn't seem to know how to smile at all. There had been no affection in her.

And when he last saw her, she'd been crying and pleading with him to keep her job. He actually had to have security drag her out of his office.

"We don't know what happened," the detective said.

That sentence could mean a lot. It could mean that they didn't know what happened at all or that they didn't know if her death was by natural causes or by murder. It could also mean that they didn't know exactly what or who caused the death, but that they suspected murder. Since he was facing a detective and not a beat officer, he knew they suspected murder.

"Where did it happen?" Deshin asked.

"We don't know that either," the detective said.

He snapped, "Then how do you know she's dead?"

Again, that slight change in the detective's face. Apparently he had finally hit on the correct question.

"Because workers found her in a waste crate in a warehouse outside the dome."

"Outside the dome . . . ?" That didn't make sense to him. Sonja hadn't even owned an environmental suit. She had hated them with a passion. "She died outside the dome?"

"I didn't say that, Mr. Deshin," the detective said.

He let out a breath. "Look, Detective, I'm cooperating here, but you need to work with me. I saw Sonja this morning, eliminated her position, and watched her leave my office. Then I went to work. I haven't gone out of the building all day."

"But your people have," the detective said.

He felt a thin thread of fury, and he suppressed it. Everyone assumed that his people murdered other people according to some whim. That simply was not true.

"Detective," he said calmly. "If I wanted Sonja dead, why would I terminate her employment this morning?"

"I have only your word for that," the detective said. "Unless you give me the footage."

"And I have only your word that she's dead," he said.

The detective pressed her hands together, then separated them. A hologram appeared between them—a young woman, looking as if she had fallen asleep in a meadow. Until he looked closely, and saw that the "meadow" was bits of food, and the young woman's eyes were open and filmy.

It was Sonja.

"My God," he said.

"If you give me the footage," the detective said, "and it confirms what you say, then you'll be in the clear. If you wait, then we're going to assume it was doctored."

Deshin glared at her. She was good—and she was right. The longer he waited, the less credibility he would have. “I’m going to consult with my attorneys,” he said. “If they believe that this information has use to you and it doesn’t cause me any legal liabilities, then you will receive it from them within the hour.”

The detective crossed her arms. “I suggest that you send it to me now. I will promise you that I will not look at anything until you or your attorneys say that I can.”

It was an odd compromise, but one that *would* protect him. If she believed he would doctor the footage, then having the footage in her possession wouldn’t harm him.

But he didn’t know the laws on something this arcane.

“How’s this, Detective,” he said. “My staff will give you a chip with the information on it. You may not put the chip into any device or watch it until I’ve consulted with my attorneys. You will wait here while I do so.”

“Seems fine to me,” the detective said. “I’ve got all the time in the world.”

She didn’t, of course. DeRicci was probably getting all kinds of messages on her links from Lake and Gumiel and Brodner and everyone else, telling her she was stupid or needed or something.

She didn’t care. She certainly wasn’t going to turn her links back on. She was close to something. She had actually surprised the Great Luc Deshin, Criminal Mastermind.

He pivoted and moved three steps away from her. He was clearly contacting someone on his links, but using private encoded ones.

A staff member approached, a woman DeRicci hadn’t seen before. The woman, dressed in a black suit, extended a hand covered with gold rings.

“If you’ll come this way, Detective DeRicci . . .”

DeRicci shook her head. “Mr. Deshin promised me a chip. I’m staying here until I get it.”

The woman opened her other hand. In it was a chip case the size of a thumbnail. The case was clear, and inside, DeRicci saw another case—blue, with a filament thinner than an eyelash.

“Here is your chip, Detective,” the woman said. “I’ve been instructed to take you—”

“I don’t care,” DeRicci said. “I’ll take the chip, and I’ll wait right here. You have my word that I won’t open either case, and I won’t watch anything until I get the okay.”

The woman’s eyes glazed slightly. Clearly, she was seeing if that was all right.

Then she focused on DeRicci, and bowed her head slightly.

“As you wish, Detective.”

She handed DeRicci the case. It was heavier than it looked. It probably had a lot of protections built in, so that she couldn’t activate anything through the case. Not that she had the technical ability to do any of that, even if she wanted to.

She sighed. She had a fluttery feeling that she had just been outmaneuvered.

Then she made herself watch Deshin. He seemed truly distressed at the news of Sonja Mycenae’s death. If DeRicci had to put money on it, she would say that he hadn’t known she was dead and he hadn’t ordered the death. But he was also well known for his business acumen, his criminal savvy, and his ability to beat a clear case against him. A man didn’t get a reputation like that by being easy to read.

She closed her fist around the chip case, clasped her hands behind her back, and waited, watching Luc Deshin the entire time.

Deshin hadn’t gone far. He wanted to keep an eye on the detective. He’d learned in the past that police officers had a tendency to wander and observe things they shouldn’t. He had staff in various parts of the lobby to prevent the detective from doing just that.

Through private, encoded links, he had contacted his favorite attorney, Martin Oberholtz. For eight years, Oberholtz had managed the most delicate cases for Deshin—always knowing how far the law could bend before it broke.

*Before I tell you what to do, Oberholtz was saying on their link, I want to see the footage.*

*It'll take time, Deshin sent.*

*Ach, Oberholtz sent. I'll just bill you for it. Send it to me.*

*I already have, Deshin sent.*

*I'll be in contact shortly, Oberholtz sent, and signed off.*

Deshin walked to the other side of the lobby. He didn't want to vanish because he didn't want the detective to think he was doing something nefarious.

But he was unsettled. That meeting with Sonja had not gone as he expected.

Over the years, Deshin had probably fired two hundred people personally, and his staff had fired even more. And that didn't count the business relationships he had terminated. Doing unpleasant things didn't bother him. They usually followed a pattern. But the meeting that morning hadn't followed a pattern that he recognized.

He had spoken quite calmly to Sonja, telling her that he and Gerda had decided to raise Paavo without help. He hadn't criticized Sonja at all. In fact, he had promised her a reference if she wanted it, and he had complimented her on the record, saying that her presence had given him and Gerda the confidence to handle Paavo alone.

He hadn't said that the confidence had come from the fact that Sonja had years of training and she missed the essential ingredient—affection. He had kept everything as neutral and positive as possible, given that he was effectively firing her without firing her.

Midway through his little speech, her eyes widened. He had thought she was going to burst into tears. Instead, she put a shaking hand to her mouth, looking like she had just received news that everything she loved in the world was going to be taken away from her.

He had a moment of confusion—had she actually cared that much about Paavo?—and then he decided it didn't matter; he and Gerda really did want to raise the boy on their own, without any outside help.

"Mr. Deshin," Sonja had said when he finished. "Please, I beg you, do not fire me."

"I'm not firing you, Sonja," he had said. "I just don't have a job for you any longer."

"Please," she said. "I will work here. I will do anything, the lowest of the low. I will do jobs that are disgusting or frightening, anything, Mr. Deshin. Please. Just don't make me leave."

He had never had an employee beg so strenuously to keep her job. It unnerved him. "I don't have any work for you."

"Please, Mr. Deshin." She reached for him and he leaned back. "Please. Don't make me leave."

That was when he sent a message along his links to security. This woman was crazy, and no one on his staff had picked up on it. He felt both relieved and appalled. Relieved that she was going nowhere near Paavo again, and appalled that he had left his beloved little son in her care.

The door opened, and then Sonja screamed "No!" at the top of her lungs. She grabbed at Deshin, and one of his security people pulled her away.

She kicked and fought and screamed and cried all the way through the door. It closed behind her, leaving him alone, but he could still hear her yelling all the way to the elevator.

The incident had unsettled him.

It still unsettled him.

March 2015

And now, just a few hours later, Sonja was dead.  
That couldn't be a coincidence.  
It couldn't be a coincidence at all.

It took nearly fifteen minutes before Luc Deshin returned. DeRicci had watched him pace on the other side of the lobby, his expression grim.

It was still grim when he reached her.

He nodded at the chip in her hand. "My staff tells me that you have a lot of information on that chip. In addition to the meeting in my office, you'll see Sonja's arrival and her departure. You'll also see that she left through that front door. After she disappeared off our external security cameras, no one on my staff saw her again."

He was being very precise. DeRicci figured his lawyer had told him to do that.

"Thank you," she said, closing her fingers around the case. "I appreciate the cooperation."

"You're welcome," Deshin said, then walked away.

She watched him go. Something about his mood had darkened since she'd originally spoken to him. Because of the lawyer? Or something else?

It didn't matter. She had the information she needed, at least for the moment. She would deal with Deshin later if she needed to.

Deshin took the stairs back to his office. He needed to think, and he didn't want to run into any of his staff on the elevator. Besides, exercise kept his head clear.

He had thought Sonja crazy after her reaction in his office. But what if she knew her life was in danger if she left his employ? Then her behavior made sense. He wasn't going to say that to the detective, nor had he mentioned it to his lawyer. Deshin was going to investigate this himself.

As he reached the top floor, he sent a message to his head of security, Otto Koos: *My office. Now.*

Deshin went through the doors and stopped, as he always did, looking at the view. He had a 360-degree view of the City of Armstrong. Right now, the dome was set at Dome Daylight, mimicking midday sunlight on Earth. He loved the look of Dome Daylight because it put buildings all over the city in such clear light that it made them look like a beautiful painting or a holographic wall image.

He crossed to his desk and called up the file on Sonja Mycenae, looking for anything untoward, anything his staff might have missed.

He saw nothing.

She had worked for a family on Earth who had filed monthly reports with the nanny service that had vetted her. The reports were excellent. Sonja had then left the family to come to the Moon, because, apparently, she had been homesick.

He couldn't find anything in a cursory search of that file that showed any contradictory information.

The door to his office opened, and Koos entered. He was a short man with broad shoulders and a way of walking that made him look like he was itching for a fight.

Deshin had known him since they were boys, and trusted Koos with his life. Koos had saved that life more than once.

"Sonja was murdered after she left us this morning," Deshin said.

Koos glanced at the door. "So that was why Armstrong PD was here."

"Yeah," Deshin said, "and it clarifies her reaction. She knew something bad would happen to her."

"She was a plant," Koos said.

"Or something," Deshin said. "We need to know why. Did anyone follow her after she left?"

"You didn't order us to," Koos said, "and I saw no reason to keep track of her. She was crying pretty hard when she walked out, but she never looked back and as far as I could tell, no one was after her."

"The police are going to trace her movements," Deshin said. "We need to as well. But what I want to know is this: What did we miss about this woman? I've already checked her file. I see nothing unusual."

"I'll go over it again," Koos said.

"Don't go over it," Deshin said, feeling a little annoyed. After all, he had just done that, and he didn't need to be double-checked. "Vet her again, as if we were just about to hire her. See what you come up with."

"Yes, sir," Koos said. Normally, he would have left after that, but he didn't. Instead, he held his position.

Deshin suppressed a sigh. Something else was coming his way. "What?"

"When you dismissed her and she reacted badly," Koos said, "I increased security around your wife and child. I'm going to increase it again, and I'm going to make sure you've got extra protection as well."

Deshin opened his mouth, but Koos put up one finger, stopping him.

"Don't argue with me," Koos said. "Something's going on here, and I don't like it."

Deshin smiled. "I wasn't going to argue with you, Otto. I was going to thank you. I hadn't thought to increase security around my family, and it makes sense."

Koos nodded, as if Deshin's praise embarrassed him. Then he left the office.

Deshin watched him go. As soon as he was gone, Deshin contacted Gerda on their private link. Koos might have increased security, but Deshin wanted to make sure everything was all right.

He used to say that families were a weakness, and he never wanted one. Then he met Gerda, and they brought Paavo into their lives.

He realized that families *were* a weakness, but they were a strength as well.

And he was going to make sure his was safe, no matter what it took.

It had taken more work than Broduer expected to get the body back to the coroner's office. Just to get the stupid crate out of the warehouse, he'd had to sign documentation swearing he wouldn't use it to make money at the expense of Ansel Management.

"Company policy," Najib Ansel had said with an insincere smile.

If Broduer hadn't known better, he would have thought that Ansel was just trying to make things difficult for him.

But things had become difficult for Broduer when DeRicci's partner, Rayvon Lake, arrived. Lake had been as angry as Broduer had ever seen him, claiming that DeRicci—who was apparently a junior officer to Lake—had been giving him orders.

Lake had shouted at everyone except Broduer. Broduer had fended a shouting match off by holding up his hands and saying, "I'm not sure what killed this girl, but I don't like it. It might contaminate everything. We have to get her out of here, now."

Lake, who was a notorious germaphobe (which Broduer found strange in a detective), had gulped and stepped back. Broduer had gotten the crate to the warehouse door before Ansel had come after him with all the documentation crap. Maybe Ansel had done it just so that he wouldn't have to talk with Lake. Broduer would have done anything to avoid Lake—and apparently just had.

Broduer smiled to himself, relieved to be back at the coroner's office. The office was a misnomer—the coroners had their own building, divided into sections to deal with the various kinds of death that happened in Armstrong.

Broduer had tested out of the alien section after two years of trying. He hated working in an environmental suit, like he so often had to. Weirdly (he always thought), humans started in the alien section and had to get a promotion to work on



human cadavers. Probably because no one really wanted to see the interior of a Sequav more than once. No human did, anyway.

There were over a dozen alien coroners, most of whom worked with human supervisors, since many alien cultures did not investigate cause of death. Armstrong was a human-run society on a human-run Moon, so human laws applied here, and human laws always needed a cause of death.

Broduer had placed Sonja Mycenae on the autopsy table, carefully positioning her before beginning work, and he'd been startled at how well proportioned she was. Most people had obvious flaws, at least when a coroner was looking at them. One arm a little too long, a roll of fat under the chin, a misshapen ankle.

He hadn't removed her clothing yet, but as far as he could tell from the work he'd done with her already, nothing was unusual. Which made her unusual all by itself.

He also couldn't see any obvious cause of death. He had noted, however, that full rigor mortis had already set in. Which was odd, since the decomposition, according to the exam his nanobots had already started, seemed to have progressed at a rate that put her death at least five hours earlier. By now, under the conditions she'd been stored in, she should have still been pliable—at least her limbs. Rigor began in the eyes, jaw, and neck, then spread to the face and through the chest before getting to the limbs. The fingers and toes were always the last to stiffen up.

That made him suspicious, particularly since liver mortis also seemed off.

He would have thought, given how long she had been curled inside that crate, that the blood would have pooled in the side of her body resting on top of the compost heap. But no blood had pooled at all.

He had bots move the autopsy table into one of the more advanced autopsy theaters. He wanted every single device he could find to do the work.

He suspected she'd been killed with some kind of hardening poison. They had become truly popular with assassins in the last two decades, and had just recently been banned from the Moon. Hardening poisons killed quickly by absorbing all the liquid in the body and/or by baking it into place. It was a fast death, but a painful one, and usually the victim's muscles froze in place, so she couldn't even express that pain as it occurred.

He put on a high-grade environmental suit in an excess of caution. Some of the hardening poisons leaked out of the pores and then infected anyone who touched them.

What he had to determine was if Sonja Mycenae had died of one of those, and if her body had been placed in a waste crate not just to hide the corpse, but to infect the food supply in Armstrong. Because the Growing Pits inspections looked at the growing materials—the soil, the water, the light, the atmosphere, and the seeds. The inspectors would also look at the fertilizer, but if it came from a certified organization like Ansel Management, then there would only be a cursory search of materials.

Hardening poisons could thread their way into the DNA of a plant—just a little bit, so that, say, an apple wouldn't be quite as juicy. A little hardening poison wouldn't really hurt the fruit of a tree (although that tree might eventually die of what a botanist would consider a wasting disease), but a trace of hardening poison in the human system would have an impact over time. And if the human continued to eat things with hardening poisons in them, the poisons would build up, until the body couldn't take it any more.

A person poisoned in that way wouldn't die like Sonja Mycenae had; instead, the poison would overwhelm the standard nanohealers that everyone had installed, that person would get sick, and their organs would slowly fail. Armstrong would have a plague but not necessarily know what caused it.

He double-checked his gloves, then let out a breath. Yes, he knew he was being paranoid. But he thought about these things a lot—the kinds of death that could

happen with just a bit of carelessness, like sickness in a dome, poison through the food supply, the wrong mix in the air supply. He had moved from working with living humans to working with the dead primarily because his imagination was so vivid. Usually working with the dead calmed him. The regular march of unremarkable deaths reminded him that most people would die of natural causes after a hundred fifty or more years, maybe longer if they took good care of themselves.

Working with the dead usually gave him hope.

But Sonja Mycenae was making him nervous.

And he didn't like that at all.

Deshin had just finished talking with Gerda when Koos sent him an encoded message:

*Need to talk as soon as you can.*

*Now's fine,* Deshin sent.

He moved away from the windows, where he'd been standing as he made sure Gerda was okay. She actually sounded happy, which she hadn't ever since Paavo had moved in.

She said she no longer felt like her every move was being judged.

Paavo seemed happier too. He wasn't crying as much, and he didn't cling as hard to Gerda. Instead, he played with a mobile from his bouncy chair and watched her cook, cooing most of the time. Just that one report made Deshin feel like he had made the right choice with Sonja.

Not that he had had a doubt—at least about her—after her reaction that morning. But apparently a tiny doubt had lingered about whether or not he and Gerda needed the help of a nanny. Gerda's report on Paavo's calmness eased that. Deshin knew they would have hard times ahead—he wasn't deluding himself—but he also knew that they had made the right choice to go nanny-free.

He hadn't told Gerda what happened to Sonja, and he wouldn't, until he knew more. He didn't want to spoil Gerda's day.

The door to Deshin's office opened, and Koos entered, looking upset. "Upset" was actually the wrong word. Something about Koos made Deshin think the man was afraid. Then Deshin shook that thought off: he'd seen Koos in extremely dangerous circumstances and the man had never seemed afraid.

"I did what you asked," Koos said without preamble. "I started vetting her all over again."

Deshin leaned against the desk, just like he had done when he spoke to Sonja. "And?"

"Her employers on Earth are still filing updates about her exemplary work for them."

Deshin felt a chill. "Tell me that they were just behind in their reports."

Koos shook his head. "She's still working for them."

"How is that possible?" Deshin asked. "We vetted her. We even used a DNA sample to make sure her DNA was the same as the DNA on file with the service. And we collected it ourselves."

Koos swallowed. "We used the service's matching program."

"Of course we did," Deshin said. "They were the ones with the DNA on file."

"We could have requested that sample, and then run it ourselves."

That chill Deshin had felt became a full-fledged shiver. "What's the difference?"

"Depth," Koos said. "They don't go into the same kind of depth we would go into in our search. They just look at standard markers, which is really all most people would need to confirm identity."

His phrasing made Deshin uncomfortable. "She's not who she said she was?"

Koos let out a small sigh. "It's more complicated than that."

More complicated. Deshin shifted. He could only think of one thing that would be more complicated.

Sonja was a clone.

And that created all kinds of other issues.

But first, he had to confirm his suspicion.

"You checked for clone marks, right?" Deshin asked. "I know you did. We always do."

The Earth Alliance required human clones to have a mark on the back of their neck or behind their ear that gave their number. If they were the second clone from an original, the number would be "2."

Clones also did not have birth certificates. They had day of creation documents. Deshin had a strict policy for Deshin Enterprises: every person he hired had to have a birth certificate or a document showing that they, as a clone, had been legally adopted by an original human and therefore could be considered human under the law.

When it came to human clones, Earth Alliance and Armstrong laws were the same: clones were property. They were created and owned by their creator. They could be bought or sold, and they had no rights of their own. The law did not distinguish between slow-grow clones, which were raised like any naturally born human child, and fast-grow clones, which reached full adult size in days, but never had a full-grown human intelligence. The laws were an injustice, but only clones seemed to protest it, and they, as property, had no real standing.

Koos's lips thinned. He didn't answer right away.

Deshin cursed. He hated having clones in his business, and didn't own any, even though he could take advantage of the loopholes in the law.

Clones made identity theft too easy, and made an organization vulnerable.

He always made certain his organization remained protected.

Or he had, until now.

"We did check like we do with every new hire." Koos's voice was strangled. "And we also checked her birth certificate. It was all in order."

"But now you're telling me it's not," Deshin said.

Koos's eyes narrowed a little, not with anger, but with tension.

"The first snag we hit," he said, "was that we were not able to get Sonja Mycnae's DNA from the service. According to them, she's currently employed, and not available for hire, so the standard service-subsidized searches are inactive. She likes her job. I looked: the job is the old one, not the one with you."

Deshin crossed his arms. "If that's the case, then how did we get the service comparison in the first place?"

"At first, I worried that someone had spoofed our system," Koos said. "They hadn't. There was a redundancy in the service's files that got repaired. I checked with a tech at the service. The tech said they'd been hit with an attack that replicated everything inside their system. It lasted for about two days."

"Let me guess," Deshin said. "Two days around the point we hired Sonja."

Koos nodded.

"I'm amazed the tech admitted it," Deshin said.

"It wasn't their glitch," Koos said. "It happened because of some government program."

"Government?" Deshin asked.

"The Earth Alliance required some changes in their software," Koos said. "They made the changes and the glitch appeared. The service caught it, removed the Earth Alliance changes, and petitioned to return to their old way of doing things. Their petition was granted."

Deshin couldn't sit still with this. "Did Sonja know this glitch was going to happen?"

Koos shrugged. "I don't know what she knew."

Deshin let out a small breath. He felt a little off-balance. "I assume the birth certificate was stolen."

"It was real. We checked it. I double-checked it today," Koos said.

Deshin rubbed his forehead. "So, was the Sonja Mycenae I hired a clone or is the clone at the other job? Or does Sonja Mycenae have a biological twin?"

Koos looked down, which was all the answer Deshin needed. She was a clone.

"She left a lot of DNA this morning," Koos said. "Tears, you name it. We checked it all."

Deshin waited, even though he knew. He knew, and he was getting furious.

"She had no clone mark," Koos said, "except in her DNA. The telomeres were marked."

"Designer Criminal Clone," Deshin said. A number of criminal organizations, most operating outside the Alliance, made and trained Designer Criminal Clones for just the kind of thing that had happened to Deshin.

The clone, who replicated someone the family or the target knew casually, would slide into a business or a household for months, maybe years, and steal information. Then the clone would leave with that information on a chip, bringing it to whoever had either hired that DCC or who had grown and trained the clone.

"I don't think she was a DCC," Koos said. "The markers don't fit anyone we know."

"A new player?" Deshin asked.

Koos shrugged. Then he took one step forward. "I'm going to check everything she touched, everything she did, sir. But this is my error, and it's a serious one. It put your business and, more importantly, your family in danger. I know you're going to fire me, but before you do, let me track down her creator. Let me redeem myself."

Deshin didn't move for a long moment. He had double-checked everything Koos had done. *Everything*. Because Sonja Mycenae—or whatever that clone was named—was going to work in his home, with his family.

"Do you think she stole my son's DNA?" Deshin asked quietly.

"I don't know. Clearly she didn't have any with her today, but if she had handlers—"

"She wouldn't have had trouble meeting them, because Gerda and I didn't want a live-in nanny," Deshin cursed silently. There was more than enough blame to go around, and if he were honest with himself, most of it belonged to him. He had been so concerned with raising his son that he hadn't taken the usual precautions in protecting his family.

"I would like to retrace all of her steps," Koos said. "We might be able to find her handler."

"Or not," Deshin said. The handler had killed her the moment she had ceased to be useful. The handler felt he could waste a slow-grow clone, expensive and well trained, placed in the household of a man everyone believed to be a criminal mastermind.

Some mastermind. He had screwed up something this important. He bit back anger, not sure how he would tell Gerda. *If* he would tell Gerda.

Something had been planned here, something he hadn't figured out yet, and that planning was not complete. Sonja (or whatever her name was) had confirmed that with her reaction to her dismissal. She was terrified, and she probably knew she was going to die.

He sighed.

"I will quit now if you'd like me to," Koos said.

Deshin wasn't ready to fire Koos.

"Find out who she answered to. Better yet, find out who made her," Deshin said. "Find her handler. We'll figure out what happens to you after you complete that assignment."

Koos nodded, but didn't thank Deshin. Koos knew his employer well, knew that the thanks would only irritate him.

Deshin hated to lose Koos, but Koos was no longer one hundred percent trustworthy. He should have caught this. He should have tested Sonja's DNA himself. And that was why Deshin would put new security measures into place for his business and his family. Measures he designed.

He'd also begin the search for the new head of security.

It would take time. And, he was afraid, it would take time to find out what exactly Sonja (or whatever her name was) had been trying to do inside his home.

That had just become his first priority. Because no one was going to hurt his family.

No matter what he had to do to protect them.

Broduer had six different nanoprobe probes digging into various places on the dead woman's skin when a holographic computer screen appeared in front of him, a red warning light flashing.

He moaned slightly. He hated the lights. They got sent to his boss automatically, and often the damn lights reported something he had done wrong.

Well, not wrong, exactly, but not according to protocol.

The irony was, everything he had done in this autopsy so far had been exactly according to protocol. The body was on an isolated gurney, which was doing its own investigation; they were in one of the most protected autopsy chambers in the coroner's office; and Broduer was using all the right equipment.

He even had on the right environmental suit for the type of poison he suspected killed the woman.

He cursed, silently and creatively, wishing he could express his frustration aloud, but knowing he couldn't, because it would become part of the permanent record.

Instead, he glared at the light and wished it would go away. Not that he could make it go away with a look.

The light had a code he had never seen before. He put his gloved finger on the code, and it created a whole new screen.

*This body is cloned. Please file the permissions code to autopsy this clone or cease work immediately.*

"The hell . . . ?" he asked, then realized he had spoken aloud, and he silently cursed himself. Some stupid supervisor, reviewing the footage, would think he was too dumb to know a cloned body from a real body.

But he had made a mistake. He hadn't taken DNA in the field. He had used facial recognition to identify this woman, and he had told DeRicci who the woman was based not on the DNA testing, but on the facial recognition.

Of course, if DeRicci hadn't pressed him to give her an identification right away, he would have followed procedure.

Broduer let out a small sigh, then remembered what he had been doing.

There was still a way to cover his ass. He had been investigating whether or not this woman died of a hardening poison, and if that poison had gotten into the composting system.

He would use that as his excuse, and then mention that he needed to continue to find cause of death for public health reasons.

Besides, someone should want to know who was killing clones and putting them into the composting. Not that it was illegal, exactly. After all, a dead clone was organic waste, just like rotted vegetables were.

He shuddered, not wanting to think about it. Maybe someone should tell the Armstrong City Council to ban the composting of any human flesh, be it original or cloned.

He sighed. He didn't want to be the one to do it. He'd slip the suggestion into his supervisor's ear and hope that she would take him up on it.

He pinged his supervisor, telling her that it was important she contact him right away. Then he bent over the body, determined to get as much work done as possible before someone shut this investigation down entirely.

DeRicci sat in her car in the part of Armstrong Police Department parking lot set aside for detectives. She hadn't used the car all day, but it was the most private place she could think of to watch the footage Deshin had given her.

She didn't want to take the footage inside the station until she'd had a chance to absorb it. She wasn't sure how relevant it was, and she wasn't sure what her colleagues would think of it.

Or, if she were being truthful with herself, she didn't want Lake anywhere near this thing. He had some dubious connections, and he might just confiscate the footage—not for the case, but for reasons she didn't really want to think about.

So she stayed in her car, quietly watching the footage for the second time, taking mental notes. Because something was off here. People rarely got that upset getting fired from a job, at least not in front of a man known to be as dangerous as Luc Deshin.

Besides, he had handled the whole thing well, made it sound like not a firing, more like something inevitable, something that Sonja Mycenae's excellent job performance helped facilitate. The man was impressive, although DeRicci would never admit that to anyone else.

When DeRicci watched the footage the first time, she had been amazed at how calmly Deshin handled Mycenae's meltdown. He managed to stay out of her way, and he managed to get his security into the office without making her get even worse.

Not that it would be easy for her to be worse. If DeRicci hadn't known that Sonja Mycenae was murdered shortly after this footage was taken, the detective would have thought the woman unhinged. Instead, DeRicci knew that Mycenae was terrified.

She had known that losing her position would result in something awful, most likely her death.

But why? And what did someone have on a simple nanny with no record, something bad enough to get her to work in the home of a master criminal and his wife, bad enough to make her beg said criminal to keep the job?

DeRicci didn't like this. She particularly did not like the way that Mycenae disappeared off the security footage as she stepped outside of the building. She stood beside the building and sobbed for a few minutes, then staggered away. No nearby buildings had exterior security cameras, and what DeRicci could get from the street cameras told her little.

She would have to get the information from inside police headquarters.

*Um, Detective?*

DeRicci sighed. The contact came from Brodner, on her links. He was asking for a visual, which she was not inclined to give him. But he probably had something to show her from the autopsy.

So she activated the visual, in two dimensions, making his head float above the car's control panel. Brodner wore an environmental suit, but he had removed the hood that had covered his face. It hung behind his skull like a half-visible alien appendage.

*News for me, Ethan?* she asked, hoping to move him along quickly. He could get much too chatty for her tastes.

*Well, you're not going to like any of it.* He ran a hand through his hair, messing it up. It looked a little damp, as if he'd been sweating inside the suit.

DeRicci waited. She didn't know how she could like or dislike any news about the woman's death. It was a case. A sad and strange case, but a case nonetheless.

*She died from a hardening poison, Broduer sent. I've narrowed it down to one of five related types. I'm running the test now to see which poison it actually is.*

Poison. That took effort. Not in the actual application—many poisons were impossible to see, taste, or feel—but in the planning. Someone wanted this woman dead, and then they wanted to keep her death secret.

*That's a weird way to kill someone, DeRicci sent.*

Broduer looked concerned. Over the woman? He usually saw corpses as a curiosity, not as someone to empathize with. That was one of the few things DeRicci liked about Broduer. He could handle a job as a job.

*It is a weird way to kill someone, Broduer sent. Then he glanced over his shoulder as if he expected someone to enter his office and yell at him. The thing is, one of these types of poisons could contaminate the food supply.*

*What?* she sent. Or maybe she said that out loud. Or both. She felt cold. Contaminate the food supply? With a body?

She wasn't quite sure of the connection, but she didn't like it.

She hadn't liked the corpse in the compost part of this case from the very first.

Broduer took an obvious deep breath and his gaze met hers. She stabilized the floating image so she wasn't tracking him as he moved up, down, and across the control panel.

*If, he sent, the poison leaked from the skin and got into the compost, then it would be layered onto the growing plants, which would take in the poison along with the nutrients. It wouldn't be enough to kill anyone, unless someone'd been doing this for a long time.*

DeRicci shook her head. *Then I don't get it. How is this anything other than a normal contamination?*

*If a wannabe killer wants to destroy the food supply, he'd do stuff like this for months, Broduer sent. People would start dying mysteriously. Generally, the old and the sick would go first, or people who are vulnerable in the parts of their bodies this stuff targets.*

*Wouldn't the basic nanohealers take care of this problem?* DeRicci was glad they weren't doing this orally. She didn't want him to know how shaken she was.

*If it were small or irregular, sure, he sent. But over time? No. They're not made to handle huge contaminations. They're not even designed to recognize these kinds of poisons. That's why these poisons can kill so quickly.*

DeRicci suppressed a shudder.

*Great, she sent. How do we investigate food contamination like that?*

*That's your problem, Detective, Broduer sent back, somewhat primly. I'd suggest starting with a search of records, seeing if there has been a rise in deaths in vulnerable populations.*

*Can't you do that easier than I can?* She sent, even though she knew he would back out. It couldn't hurt to try to get him to help.

*Not at the moment, he sent. I have a job to do.*

She nearly cursed at him. But she managed to control herself. A job to do. The bastard. *She* had a job to do too, and it was just as important as his job. This was why she hated working with Broduer. He was a jerk.

*Well, she sent, let me know the type of poison first, before I get into that part of the investigation. You said there were five, and only one could contaminate the food supply. You think that's the one we're dealing with?*

*I don't know yet, Detective, he sent. I'll know when the testing is done.*

*Which will take how long?*

He shrugged. *Not long, I hope.*

GREAT, she sent again. She wanted to push him, but pushing him sometimes made him even more passive-aggressive about getting work done.

*Well, you were right, she sent. I didn't like it. Now I'm off to investigate even more crap.*

*Um, not yet, Broduer sent.*

*Not yet?* Who was this guy and why did he think he could control everything she did? She clenched her fists. Pretty soon, she would tell this idiot exactly what she thought of him, and that wouldn't make for a good working relationship.

*Um, yeah, he sent. There's one other problem.*

She waited, her fists so tight her fingernails were digging into the skin of her palms.

*He looked down. I, um, misidentified your woman.*

*You what?* He had been an idiot about helping her, and then he told her that he had done crappy work? This man was the absolutely worst coroner she'd ever worked with (which was saying something) and she was going to report him to the Chief of Detectives, maybe even to the Chief of Police, and get him removed from his position.

*YEAH, Broduer sent. She's, um, not Sonja Mycenae.*

*You said that, DeRicci sent.* Already, her mind was racing. Misidentifying the corpse would cause all kinds of problems, not the least of which would be problems with Luc Deshin. *Who the hell is she, then?*

Broduer's skin had turned gray. He clearly knew he had screwed up big time. *She's a clone of Sonja Mycenae.*

A WHAT? DeRicci rolled her eyes. That would have been good to know right from the start. Because it meant the investigation had gone in the wrong direction from the moment she had a name.

*A clone. I'm sorry, Detective.*

*You should be, DeRicci sent. I shouldn't even be on this investigation. This isn't a homicide.*

*Well, technically, it's the same thing, Broduer sent.*

*Technically, it isn't, DeRicci sent.* She'd had dozens of clone cases before, and no matter how much she argued with the Chief of Detectives, Andrea Gumiela, it didn't matter. The clones weren't human under the law; their deaths fell into property crimes, generally vandalism or destruction of valuable property, depending on how much the clone was worth or how much it cost to create.

*But, Detective, she's a human being . . .*

DeRicci sighed. She believed that, but what she believed didn't matter. What mattered was what the law said and how her boss handled it. And she'd been through this with Gumiela. Gumiela would send DeRicci elsewhere. Gumiela hadn't seen the poor girl crying and begging for her life in front of Deshin. Gumiela hadn't seen the near-perfect corpse, posed as if she were sleeping on a pile of compost.

*Wait a minute, DeRicci sent. You told me about the poisoning first because . . .?*

*Because, Detective, she might not be human, but she might have been a weapon or weaponized material. And that would fall into your jurisdiction, wouldn't it?*

Just when she thought that Broduer was the worst person she had ever worked with, he manipulated a clone case to keep it inside DeRicci's detective division.

*I don't determine jurisdiction, she sent, mostly because this was on the record, and she didn't want to show her personal feelings on something that might hit court and derail any potential prosecution.*

*But check, would you? Broduer sent. Because someone competent should handle this.*

She wasn't sure what "this" was: the dead clone or the contamination.

*Just send me all the information, DeRicci sent, and let me know the minute you confirm which hardening poison killed this clone.*

*I'll have it soon, Broduer sent and signed off.*



DeRicci leaned back in the car seat, her cheeks warm. She had gone to Luc Deshin for nothing.

Or had she?

Which Sonja Mycenae had Deshin fired that morning? The real one? Or the clone?

DeRicci let herself out of the car. She had to talk to Gumiela. But before she did, she needed to find out where the real Mycenae was—and fast.

Deshin wasn't certain how to tell Gerda that Sonja had been a plant, placed in their home for a reason he didn't know yet. He wandered his office, screens moving with him as he examined the tracker he had placed in Sonja. Then he winced. Every time he thought of the clone as Sonja, he felt like a fool. From now on, he would just call her the clone, because she clearly wasn't Sonja.

So he examined the information from the tracker he had placed in the clone's palm the moment she was hired. She hadn't known he had inserted it. He had done it when he shook her hand, using technology that didn't show up on any of the regular scans.

He wished he had been paranoid enough to install a video tracker, but he had thought—or rather, Gerda had thought—that their nanny needed her privacy in her off time.

Of course, that had been too kind. Deshin should have tracked the clone the way he tracked anyone he didn't entirely trust.

Whenever the clone had been with Paavo, Deshin had always kept a screen open. He'd even set an alert in case the clone took Paavo out of the house without Gerda accompanying them. That alert had never activated, because Gerda had always been nearby when the clone was with Paavo. Deshin was grateful for that caution now. He had no idea what serious crisis they had dodged.

He was now searching through all the other information in the tracker—where the clone had gone during her days off, where she had spent her free time. He knew that Koos had been, in theory, making sure she had no unsavory contacts—or at least, Deshin had tasked Koos with doing that.

Now, Deshin was double-checking his head of security, making certain that he had actually done his job.

The first thing Deshin had done was make certain that the clone hadn't gone to the bad parts of town. According to the tracker, she hadn't. Her apartment was exactly where she had claimed it was, and as far as he could tell, all she had done in her off hours was shop for her own groceries, eaten at a local restaurant, and gone home.

He had already sent a message to one of the investigative services he used. He wanted them to search the clone's apartment. He wanted video and DNA and all kinds of trace. He wanted an investigation of her finances and a look at the things she kept.

He also didn't want anyone from Deshin Enterprises associated with that search. He knew that his investigative service would keep him out of it. They had done so before.

He had hired them to search before he had known she was a clone. He had hired them while he was waiting for his attorney to look at the footage he had given that detective. With luck, they'd be done with the search by now.

But he had decided to check the tracker himself, looking for anomalies.

The only anomaly he had found was a weekly visit to a building in downtown Armstrong. On her day off, she went to that building at noon. She had also been at that building the evening Deshin had hired her. He scanned the address, looking for the businesses that rented or owned the place. The building had dozens of small offices, and none of the businesses were registered with the city.

He found that odd: usually the city insisted that every business register for tax purposes. So he traced the building's ownership. He went through several layers of corporate dodges to find something odd: the building's owner wasn't a corporation at all.

It was the Earth Alliance.

He let out a breath, and then sank into a nearby chair.

Suddenly everything made sense.

The Earth Alliance had been after him for years, convinced he was breaking a million different Alliance laws and not only getting away with it, but making billions from the practice. Ironically, he had broken a lot of Alliance laws when he started out, and he still had a lot of sketchy associates, but *he* hadn't broken a law in years and years.

Still, it would have been a coup for someone in Alliance government to bring down Luc Deshin and his criminal enterprises.

The Alliance had found it impossible to plant listening devices and trackers in Deshin's empire. The Alliance was always behind Deshin Enterprises when it came to technology. And Deshin himself was innately cautious—

Or he had thought he was, until this incident with the clone.

They had slipped her into his home. They might have had a hundred purposes in doing so—as a spy on his family, to steal familial DNA, to set up tracking equipment in a completely different way than it had been done before.

And for an entire month, they had been successful.

He was furious at himself, but he knew he couldn't let that emotion dominate his thoughts. He had to take action, and he had to do so now.

He used his links to summon Ishiyo Cumija to his office. He'd been watching her for some time. She hadn't been Koos's second in command in the security department. She had set up her own fiefdom, and once she had mentioned to Deshin that she worried no one was taking security seriously enough.

At the time, he had thought she was making a play for Koos's job. Deshin *still* thought she was making a play for Koos's job on that day, but she might have been doing so with good reason.

Now, she would get a chance to prove herself.

While Deshin waited for her, he checked the clone's DNA and found that strange mark embedded into her system. He had never seen anything like it, either. The Designer Criminal Clones he'd run into had always had a product stamp embedded into their DNA. This wasn't a standard DCC product stamp.

It looked like something else.

He copied it, then opened Cumija's file, accessed the DNA samples she had to give every week, and searched to see if there was any kind of mark. His system always searched for the DCC product stamps, but rarely searched for other evidence of cloning, including shortened telomeres.

Shortened telomeres could happen naturally. In the past, he'd found that searching for them gave him so many false positives—staff members who were older than they appeared, employees who had had serious injuries—that he'd decided to stop searching for anything but the product marks.

He wondered now if that had been a mistake. His search of Cumija's DNA found no DCC product mark, and nothing matching the mark his system had found in the clone's DNA.

As the search ended, Cumija entered the office.

She was stunningly beautiful, with a cap of straight hair so black it almost looked blue, and dancing black eyes. Until he met Cumija, he would never have thought that someone so very attractive would function well in a security position, but she had turned out to be one of his best bodyguards.

She dressed like a woman sexually involved with a very rich man. Her clothing always revealed her taut nut-brown skin and her fantastic legs. Sometimes she looked nearly naked in the clothing she had chosen. Men and women watched her wherever she went, and dismissed her as someone decorative, someone being used.

On this day, she wore a white dress that crossed her breasts with an X, revealing her sides, and expanding to cover her hips and buttocks. Her matching white shoes looked as deadly as the shoes that she had used to kill a man trying to get to Deshin one afternoon.

"That nanny we hired turns out to have been a clone," Deshin said without greeting.

"Yes, I heard." Cumija's voice was low and sexy, in keeping with her appearance.

"Has Koos made an announcement?" Deshin asked. Because he would have recommended against it.

"No," she said curtly, and Deshin almost smiled. She monitored everything Koos did. It was a great trait in a security officer, a terrible trait in a subordinate—at least from the perspective of someone in Koos's position.

Deshin said, "I need you to check the other employees—you, and you *only*. I don't want anyone to know what you're doing. I have the marker that was in the cloned Sonja Mycenae's DNA. I want you to see if there's a match. I also want a secondary check for Designer Criminal Clone marks, and then I want you to do a slow search of anyone with abnormal telomeres."

Cumija didn't complain, even though he was giving her a lot of work. "You want me to check everyone," she said.

"Yes," he said. "Start with people who have access to me, and then move outward. Do it quickly and quietly."

"Yes, sir," she said.

"Report the results directly to me," he said.

"All right," she said. "Are links all right?"

"No," he said. "You will report in person."

She nodded, thanked him, and left the office.

He stood there for a moment, feeling a little shaken. If the Alliance was trying to infiltrate his organization, then he wouldn't be surprised if there were other clones stationed in various areas, clones he had missed.

After Cumija checked, he would have Koos do the same search, and see if he came up with the same result.

Deshin went back to his investigation of that building that the clone had visited regularly. He had no firm evidence of Earth Alliance involvement. Just suspicions, at least at the moment.

And regular citizens of the Alliance would be stunned to think that their precious Alliance would infiltrate businesses using slow-grow clones, and then dispose of them when they lost their usefulness. But Deshin knew the Alliance did all kinds of extra-legal things to protect itself over the centuries. And somewhere, Deshin had been flagged as a threat to the Alliance.

He had known that for some time. He had always expected some kind of infiltration of his business. But the infiltration of his home was personal.

And it needed to stop.

Ethan Brodner looked at the information pouring across his screen, and let out a sigh of relief. The hardening poison wasn't one of the kinds that could leach through the skin. He still had to test the compost to see if the poison had contaminated it, but he doubted that.

The liver mortis told him that she had died elsewhere, and then been placed in the crate. And given how fast this hardening poison acted, the blood wouldn't have been able to pool for more than a few minutes anyway.

He stood and walked back into the autopsy room. Now that he knew the woman had died of something that wouldn't hurt him if he came in contact with her skin or breathed the air around her, he didn't need the environmental suit.

Hers was the only body in this autopsy room. He had placed the clone on her back before sending the nanobots into her system. They were still working, finding out even more about her.

He knew now that she was a slow-grow clone, which meant she had lived some twenty years, had hopes, dreams, and desires. As a forensic pathologist who had examined hundreds of human corpses—cloned and non-cloned—the *only* differences he had ever seen were the telomeres and the clone marks.

Slow-grow clones were human beings in everything but the law.

He could make the claim that fast-grow clones were too, that they had the mind of a child inside an adult body, but he tried not to think about that one. Because it meant that all those horrors visited on fast-grow clones meant those horrors were visited on a human being that hadn't seen more than a few years of life, an innocent in all possible ways.

He blinked hard, trying not to think about any of it. Then he stopped beside her table. Lights moved along the back of it, different beams examining her, trying to glean her medical history and every single story her biology could tell. Now that it was clear that the poison that killed her wouldn't contaminate the dome, no one would investigate this case. No one would care.

No one legally *had* to care.

He sighed, then shook his head, wondering if he could make one final push to solve her murder. Detective DeRicci had asked for a list of bodies found in the crates. Brodner would make her that list after all, but before he did, he would see if those bodies were "human" or clones.

If they were clones, then there was a sabotage problem, some kind of property crime—hell, it wasn't his job to come up with the charge, not when he gave her the thing to investigate.

But maybe he could find something to investigate, something that would have the side benefit of giving some justice to this poor woman, lying alone and unwanted on his autopsy table.

"I'm doing what I can," he whispered, and then wished he hadn't spoken aloud.

His desire to help her would be in the official record. Then he corrected himself: There would be no official record, since she wasn't officially a murder victim.

He was so sorry about that. He'd still document everything he could. Maybe in the future, the laws would change. Maybe in the future, her death would matter as more than a statistic.

Maybe in the future, she'd be recognized as a person, instead of something to be thrown away, like leftover food.

The Chief of Detectives, Andrea Gumiela, had an office one floor above DeRicci's, but it was light years from DeRicci's. DeRicci's office was in the center of a large room, sectioned off with dark movable walls. She could protect her area by putting a bubble around it for a short period of time, particularly if she were conducting an interview that she felt wouldn't work in one of the interview rooms, but there was no real privacy and no sense of belonging.

DeRicci hated working out in the center, and hoped that one day she would eventually get an office of her own. The tiny aspirations of the upwardly mobile, her ex-husband would have said. She couldn't entirely disagree. He had the unfortunate habit of being right.

And as she looked at Gumiela's office, which took up much of the upper floor, DeRicci knew she would never achieve privacy like this. She wasn't political enough. Some days she felt like she was one infraction away from being terminated.

Most days, she didn't entirely care.

Andrea Gumiela, on the other hand, was the most political person DeRicci had ever met. Her office was designed so that it wouldn't offend anyone. It didn't have artwork on the walls, nor did it have floating imagery. The décor shifted colors when someone from outside the department entered.

When someone was as unimportant as DeRicci, the walls were a neutral beige, and the desk a dark woodlike color. The couch and chairs at the far end of the room matched the desk.

But DeRicci had been here when the governor-general arrived shortly after her election, and the entire room shifted to vibrant colors—the purples and whites associated with the governor-general herself. The shift, which happened as the governor-general was announced, had disturbed DeRicci, but Gumiela managed it as a matter of course. She was going to get promoted some day, and she clearly hoped the governor-general would do it.

"Make it fast," Gumiela said as DeRicci entered. "I have meetings all afternoon."

Gumiela was tall and heavysset, but her black suit made her look thinner than she was—probably with some kind of tech that DeRicci didn't want to think about. Gumiela's red hair was piled on top of her head, making her long face seem even longer.

"I wanted to talk with you in person about that woman we found in the Ansel Management crate," DeRicci said.

Gumiela, for all her annoying traits, did keep up on the investigations.

"I thought Rayvon Lake was in charge of that case," Gumiela said.

DeRicci shrugged. "He's not in charge of anything, sir. Honestly, when it comes to cases like this, I don't even like to consult him."

Gumiela studied her. "He's your partner, Detective."

"Maybe," DeRicci said, "but he doesn't investigate crimes. He takes advantage of them."

"That's quite a charge," Gumiela said.

"I can back it with evidence," DeRicci said.

"Do so," Gumiela said, to DeRicci's surprise. DeRicci frowned. Had Gumiela paired them so that DeRicci would bring actual evidence against Lake to the Chief's office? It made an odd kind of sense. No one could control Lake, and no one could control DeRicci, but for different reasons. Lake had his own tiny fiefdom, and DeRicci was just plain contrary.

"All right," DeRicci said, feeling a little off balance. She hadn't expected anything positive from Gumiela.

And then Gumiela reverted to type. "I'm in a hurry, remember?"

"Yes, sir, sorry, sir," DeRicci said. This woman always set her teeth on edge. "The woman in the crate, she was killed with a hardening poison. For a while, Brodruer thought she might have been put there to contaminate the food supply, but it was the wrong kind of poison. We're okay on that."

Gumiela raised her eyebrows slightly. Apparently she hadn't heard about the possible contamination. DeRicci had been worried that she had.

"Good . . ." Gumiela said in a tone that implied . . . *and* . . . ?

"But, I got a list from him, and sir, someone is dumping bodies in those crates all over the city, and has been for at least a year, maybe more."

"No one saw this pattern?" Gumiela asked.

"The coroner's office noticed it," DeRicci said, making sure she kept her voice calm. "Ansel Management noticed it, but the owner, Najib Ansel, tells me that over the decades his family has owned the business, they've seen all kinds of things dumped in the crates."

"Bodies, though, bodies should have caught our attention," Gumiela said. Clearly, DeRicci had Gumiela's attention now.

"No," DeRicci said. "The coroner got called in, but no one called us."

"Well, I'll have to change this," Gumiela said. "I'll—"

"Wait, sir," DeRicci said. "They didn't call us for the correct legal reasons."

Gumiela turned her head slightly, as if she couldn't believe she had heard DeRicci right. "What reasons could those possibly be?"

"The dead are all clones, sir," DeRicci made sure none of her anger showed up in the tone of her voice.

"Clones? Including this one?"

"Yes, sir," DeRicci said. "And they were all apparently slow-grow. If they had been considered human under the law, we would have said they were murdered."

Gumiela let out an exasperated breath. "This woman, this poisoned woman, she's a clone?"

"Yes, sir," DeRicci knew she only had a moment here to convince Gumiela to let her continue on this case. "But I'd like to continue my investigation, sir, because—"

"We'll send it down to property crimes," Gumiela said.

"Sir," DeRicci said. "This pattern suggests a practicing serial killer. At some point, he'll find legal humans, and then he'll be experienced—"

"What is Ansel Management doing to protect its crates?" Gumiela said.

DeRicci felt a small surge of hope. Was Gumiela actually considering this? "They have sensors that locate things by weight and size. They believe they've reported all the bodies that have come through their system in the last several years."

"They believe?" Gumiela asked.

"There's no way to know without checking every crate," DeRicci said.

"Well, this is a health and safety matter. I'll contact the Armstrong city inspectors and have them investigate all of the recycling/compost plants."

DeRicci tried not to sigh. This wasn't going her way after all. "I think that's a good idea, sir, but—"

"Tell me, Detective," Gumiela said. "Did you have any leads at all on this potential serial before you found out that the bodies belonged to clones?"

DeRicci felt her emotions shift again. She wasn't sure why she was so emotionally involved here. Maybe because she knew no one would investigate, which meant no one would stop this killer, if she couldn't convince Gumiela to keep the investigation in the department.

"She worked as a nanny for Luc Deshin," DeRicci said. "He fired her this morning."

"I thought this was that case," Gumiela said. "His people probably killed her."

"I considered that," DeRicci said. "But he wouldn't have gone through the trouble of firing her if he was just going to kill her."

Gumiela harrumphed. Then she walked around the furniture, trailing her hand over the back of the couch. She was actually considering DeRicci's proposal—and she knew DeRicci had a point.

"Do you know who the original was?" Gumiela asked.

DeRicci's heart sank. She hadn't wanted Gumiela to ask this question. DeRicci hadn't recognized the name, but Lake had. He had left a message on DeRicci's desk—a message that rose up when she touched the desk's surface (the bastard)—which said, *Why do we care that the daughter of an off-Moon crime lord got murdered?*

DeRicci then looked up the Mycenae family. They were a crime family and had been for generations, but Sonja herself didn't seem to be part of the criminal side. She had attended the best schools on Earth, and actually had a nanny certificate. She had renounced her family both visibly and legally, and was trying to live her own life.

"The original's name is Sonja Mycenae," DeRicci said.

"The Mycenae crime family," Gumiela let out a sigh. "There's a pattern here, and one we don't need to be involved in. Obviously there's some kind of winnowing going

on in the Earth-Moon crime families. I'll notify the Alliance to watch for something bigger, but I don't think you need to investigate this."

"Sir, I know Luc Deshin thought she was Sonja Mycenae," DeRicci said. "He didn't know she was a clone. That means this isn't a crime family war—"

"We don't know what it is, Detective," Gumiela said. "And despite your obvious interest in the case, I'm moving you off it. I have better things for you to do. I'll send this and the other cases down to property, and let them handle the investigation."

"Sir, please—"

"Detective, you have plenty to do. I want that report on Rayvon Lake by morning." Gumiela nodded at her.

DeRicci's breath caught. Gumiela was letting her know that if she dropped this case, she might get a new partner. And maybe, she would guarantee that Lake stopped polluting the department.

There was nothing DeRicci could do. This battle was lost.

"Thank you, sir," she said, not quite able to keep the disappointment from her voice. Gumiela had already returned to her desk.

DeRicci headed for the door. As it opened, Gumiela said, "Detective, one last thing."

DeRicci closed the door and faced Gumiela, expecting some kind of reprimand or admonition.

"Have you done the clone notification?" Gumiela asked.

Earth Alliance law required any official organization that learned of a clone to notify the original, if at all possible.

"Not yet, sir," DeRicci said. She had held off, hoping that she would keep the case. If she had, she could have gone to the Mycenae family, and maybe learned something that had relevance to the case.

"Don't," Gumiela said. "I'll take care of that, too."

"I don't mind, sir," DeRicci said.

"The Mycenae require a delicate touch," Gumiela said. "It's better if the notification goes through the most official of channels."

DeRicci nodded. She couldn't quite bring herself to thank Gumiela. Or even to say anything else. So she let herself out of the office.

And stopped in the hallway.

For a moment, she considered going back in and arguing with Gumiela. Because Gumiela wasn't going to notify anyone about the clone.

Gumiela probably believed that crime families should fight amongst themselves, so the police didn't have to deal with them.

DeRicci paused for a half second.

If she went back in, she would probably lose her job. Because she would tell Gumiela exactly what she thought of the clone laws, and the way that property would screw up the investigation, and the fact that *people* were actually dying and being placed in crates.

But, if DeRicci lost her job, she wouldn't be able to investigate anything.

The next time she got a clone case, she'd sit on that information for as long as she could, finish the investigation, and maybe make an arrest. Sure, it might not hold up, but she could get one of the other divisions to search the perpetrator's home and business, maybe catch him with something else.

This time, she had screwed up. She'd followed the rules too closely. She shouldn't have gone to Gumiela so soon.

DeRicci would know better next time.

And she'd play dumb when Gumiela challenged her over it.

Better to lose a job after solving a case, instead of in the middle of a failed one.

DeRicci sighed. She didn't feel better, but at least she had a plan. Even if it was a plan she didn't like at all.

The place that the clone frequented near the Port was a one-person office, run by a man named Cade Faulke. Ostensibly, Faulke ran an employment consulting office, one that helped people find jobs or training for jobs. But it didn't take a lot of digging to discover that that was a cover for a position with Earth Alliance Security.

From what little Deshin could find, it seemed that Faulke worked alone, with an android guard—the kind that usually monitored prisons. Clearly, no one expected Faulke to be investigated: the android alone would have been a tip-off to anyone who looked deeper than the thin cover that Faulke had over his name.

Deshin wondered how many other Earth Alliance operatives worked like that inside of Armstrong. He supposed there were quite a few, monitoring various Earth Alliance projects.

Projects like, apparently, his family.

Deshin let out a sigh. He wandered around his office, feeling like it had become a cage. He clenched and unclenched his fists.

Sometimes he hated the way he had restrained himself to build his business and his family. Sometimes he just wanted to go after someone on his own, squeeze the life out of that person, and then leave the corpse, the way someone had left that clone.

Spying on Deshin's family. Gerda and five-month-old Paavo had done nothing except get involved with him.

And he would wager that Sonja Mycenae's family would say the same thing about her. He stopped. He hadn't spoken to the Mycenae family in a long time, but he owed them for an ancient debt.

He sent an encoded message through his links to Aurla Mycenae, the head of the Mycenae and Sonja's mother, asking for a quick audience.

Then Deshin got a contact from Cumija: *Five low-level employees have the marker. None of them have access to your family or to anything important inside Deshin Enterprises. How do you want me to proceed?*

*Send me a list,* he sent back.

At that moment, his links chirruped, announcing a massive holomessage so encoded that it nearly overloaded his system. He accepted the message, only to find out it was live.

Aurla Mycenae appeared, full-sized, in the center of his floor. She wore a flowing black gown that accented her dark eyebrows and thick black hair. She had faint lines around her black eyes. Otherwise she looked no older than she had the last time he saw her, at least a decade ago.

"Luc," she said in a throaty voice that hadn't suited her as a young woman, but suited her now. "I get the sense this isn't pleasure."

"No," he said. "I thought I should warn you. I encountered a slow-grow clone of your daughter Sonja."

He decided not to mention that he had hired that clone or that she had been murdered.

Mycenae exhaled audibly. "Damn Earth Alliance. Did they try to embed her in your organization?"

"They succeeded for a time," he said.

"And then?"

So much for keeping the information back. "She turned up dead this morning."

"Typical," Mycenae said. "They've got some kind of operation going, and they've been using clones of my family. You're not the first to tell me this."

"All slow-grow?" Deshin asked.



"Yes," Mycenae said. "We've been letting everyone know that anyone applying for work from our family isn't really from our family. I never thought of contacting you because I thought you went legit."

"I have," Deshin lied. He had gone legit on most things. He definitely no longer had his fingers in the kinds of deals that the Mycenae family was famous for.

"Amazing they tried to embed with you, then," Mycenae said.

"She was nanny to my infant son," he said, and he couldn't quite keep the fury from his voice.

"Oh." Mycenae sighed. "They want to use your family like they're using mine. We're setting something up, Luc. We've got the Alliance division doing this crap tracked, and we're going to shut it down. You want to join us?"

Take on an actual Earth Alliance Division? As a young man, he would have considered it. As a man with a family and a half-legitimate business, he didn't dare take the risk.

"I trust you to handle it, Aurla," he said.

"They have your family's DNA now," she said, clearly as a way of enticement.

"It's of no use to them in the short term," he said, "and by the time we reach the long term, you'll have taken care of everything."

"It's not like you to trust anyone, Luc."

And, back when she had known him well, that had been true. But now, he had to balance security for himself and his business associates with security for his family.

"I'm not trusting you per se, Aurla," he said. "I just know how you operate."

She grinned at him. "I'll let you know when we're done."

"No need," he said. "Good luck."

And then he signed off. The last thing he wanted was to be associated in any way with whatever operation Aurla ran. She was right: it wasn't like him to trust anyone. And while he trusted her to destroy the division that was hurting her family, he didn't trust her to keep him out of it.

Too much contact with Aurla Mycenae, and Deshin might find himself arrested as the perpetrator of whatever she was planning. Mycenae was notorious for betraying colleagues when her back was against the wall.

The list came through his links from Cumija. She was right: the employees were low-level. He didn't recognize any of the names and had to look them up. None of them had even met Deshin.

Getting the clone of Sonja embedded into his family was some kind of coup.

He wouldn't fire anyone yet. He wanted to see if Koos came up with the same list. If he did, then Deshin would move forward.

But these employees were tagged, just like Sonja's clone had been. He decided to see if they had been visiting Faulke as well.

And if they had, Faulke would regret ever crossing paths with Deshin Enterprises.

Detective DeRicci left Andrea Gumiela's office. Gumiela felt herself relax. DeRicci was trouble. She hated rules and she had a sense of righteousness that often made it difficult for her to do her job well. There wasn't a lot of righteousness in the law, particularly when Earth Alliance law trumped Armstrong law.

Gumiela had to balance both.

She resisted the urge to run a hand through her hair. It had taken a lot of work to pile it just so on top of her head, and she didn't like wasting time on her appearance, as important as it was to her job.

Of course, the days when it was important were either days when a major disaster hit Armstrong or when someone in her department screwed up.

She certainly hoped this clone case wouldn't become a screw-up.

She put a hand over her stomach, feeling slightly ill. She had felt ill from the moment DeRicci mentioned Mycenae and Deshin. At that moment, Gumiela knew who had made the clone and who was handling it.

She also knew who was killing the clones—or at least authorizing the deaths.

DeRicci was right. Those deaths presaged a serial killer (or, in Gumiela's unofficial opinion, proved one already existed). Or worse, the deaths suggested a policy of targeted killings that Gumiela couldn't countenance in her city.

Technically, Gumiela should contact Cade Faulke directly. He had contacted her directly more than once to report a possible upcoming crime. She had used him as an informant, which meant she had used his clones as informants as well.

And those clones were ending up dead.

She choked back bile. Some people, like DeRicci, would say that Gumiela had hands as dirty as Faulke's.

But she hadn't known he was killing the clones when they ceased being useful or when they crossed some line. She also hadn't known that he had been poisoning them using such a painful method. And he hadn't even thought about the possible contamination of the food supply.

Gumiela swallowed hard again, hoping her stomach would settle.

Technically, she should contact him and tell him to cease that behavior.

But Gumiela had been in her job a long time. She knew that telling someone like Faulke to quit was like telling an addict to stop drinking. It wouldn't happen, and it couldn't be done.

She couldn't arrest him, either. Even if she caught him in the act, all he was doing was damaging property. And that might get him a fine or two or maybe a year or so in jail, if the clones' owners complained. But if DeRicci was right, the clones' owners were the Earth Alliance itself. And Faulke worked for the Alliance, so technically, *he* was probably the owner, and property owners could do whatever they wanted with their belongings.

Except toss them away in a manner that threatened the public health.

Gumiela sat in one of the chairs and leaned her head back, closing her eyes, forcing herself to think.

She had to do something, and despite what she had said to DeRicci, following procedure was out of the question. She needed to get Faulke out of Armstrong, only she didn't have the authority to do so.

But she knew who did.

She sat up. Long ago, she'd met Faulke's handler, Ike Jarvis. She could contact him. Maybe he would work with her.

It was worth a try.

Otto Koos led his team to the building housing Cade Faulke's fake business. The building was made of some kind of polymer that changed appearance daily. This day's appearance made it seem like old-fashioned red brick Koos hadn't seen since his childhood on Earth.

Five Ansel Management crates stood in their protected unit in the alley behind the building. They had a cursory lock with a security code that anyone in the building probably had.

It was as much of a confession as he needed.

But the boss would need more. Luc Deshin had given strict orders for this mission—no killing.

Koos knew he was on probation now—maybe forever. He had missed the Mycenae clone, and, after he had done a quick scan of the employees, he'd discovered he

had missed at least five others. At least they hadn't been anywhere near the Deshin family.

The Mycenae clone had. Who knew what kind of material the Alliance had gathered? Faulke knew. Eventually, Koos would know too. It just might take some time.

He had brought ten people with him to capture Faulke. The office had an android guard, though, the durable kind used in prisons. Koos either had to disable it or get it out of the building.

He'd failed the one time he'd tried to disable those things in the past. He was opting for getting it out of the building.

*Ready?* he sent to two of his team members.

Yes, they sent back at the same time.

*Go!* he sent.

They were nowhere near him, but he knew what they were going to do. They were going to start a fight in front of the building that would get progressively more violent. And then they'd start shooting up the area with laser pistols.

Other members of his team would prevent any locals from stopping the fight, and the fight would continue until the guard came down.

Then Koos would sneak in the back way, along with three other members of his team.

They were waiting now. They had already checked the back door—unlocked during daylight hours. They were talking as if they had some kind of business with each other.

At least they weren't shifting from foot to foot like he wanted to do.

Instead, all he could do was stare at that stamp for Ansel Management.

It hadn't been much work to pick up the Mycenae clone and stuff her into one of the crates.

If Deshin hadn't given the no-kill order, then Koos would have stuffed Faulke into one of the crates, dying, but alive, so that he knew what he had done.

Koos would have preferred that to Deshin's plan.

But Koos wasn't in charge. And he had to work his way back into Deshin's good graces.

And he would do that.

Starting now.

Gumiela had forgotten that Ike Jarvis was an officious prick. He ran intelligence operatives who worked inside the Alliance. Generally, those operatives didn't operate in human-run areas. In fact, they shouldn't operate in human-run areas at all.

Earth Alliance Intelligence was supposed to do the bulk of its work *outside* the Alliance.

Gumiela had contacted him on a special link the Earth Alliance had set up for the Armstrong Police Department, to be used only in cases of Earth Alliance troubles or serious Alliance issues.

She figured this counted.

Jarvis appeared in the center of the room, his three-dimensional image fritzing in and out either because of a bad connection or because of the levels of encoding this conversation was going through.

He looked better when he appeared and disappeared. She preferred it when he was slightly out of focus.

"This had better be good, Andy," Jarvis said, and Gumiela felt her shoulders stiffen. No one called her Andy, not even her best friends. Only Jarvis had come up with that nickname, and somehow he seemed to believe it made them closer.

"I need you to pull Cade Faulke," she said.

"I don't pull anyone on your say so." Jarvis fritzed again. His image came back just a little smaller, just a little tighter. So the problem was on his end.

If she were in a better mood, she would smile. Jarvis was short enough without doctoring the image. He had once tried to compensate for his height by buying enhancements that deepened his voice. All they had done was ruin it, leaving him sounding like he had poured salt down his throat.

"You pull him or I arrest him for attempted mass murder," she said, a little surprised at herself.

Jarvis moved and fritzed again. Apparently he had taken a step backward or something, startled by her vehemence.

"What the hell did he do?" Jarvis asked, not playing games any longer.

"You have Faulke running slow-grow clones in criminal organizations, right?" she asked.

"Andy," he said, returning to that condescending tone he had used earlier, "I can't tell you what I'm doing."

"Fine," she snapped. "I thought we had a courteous relationship, based on mutual interest. I was wrong. Sorry to bother you, Ike—"

"Wait," he said. "What did he do?"

"It doesn't matter," she said. "You get to send Earth Alliance lawyers here to talk about the top-secret crap to judges who might've died because of your guy's carelessness."

And then she signed off.

She couldn't do anything she had just threatened Jarvis with. The food thing hadn't risen to the level where she could charge Faulke, and that was if she could prove that he had put the bodies into the crates himself. He had an android guard, which the Chief of Police had had to approve—those things weren't supposed to operate inside the city—and that guard had probably done all the dirty work. They would just claim malfunction, and Faulke would be off the hook.

Jarvis fritzed back in, fainter now. The image had moved one meter sideways, which meant he was superimposed over one of her office chairs. The chair cut through him at his knees and waist. Obviously, he had no idea where his image had appeared, and she wasn't about to tell him or move the image.

"Okay, okay," Jarvis said. "I've managed to make this link as secure as I possibly can, given my location. Guarantee that your side is secure."

Gumiela shrugged. "I'm alone in my office, in the Armstrong police department. Good enough for you?"

She didn't tell him that she was recording this whole thing. She was tired of being used by this asshole.

"I guess it'll have to be. Yes, Faulke is running the clones that we have embedded with major criminal organizations on the Moon."

"If the clones malfunction"—she chose that word carefully—"what's he supposed to do?"

"Depends on how specific the clone is to the job, and how important it is to the operation," he said. "Generally, Faulke's supposed to ship the clone back. That's why Armstrong PD approved android guards for his office."

"There aren't guards," she said. "There's only one."

Jarvis's image came in a bit stronger. "What?"

"Just one," she said, "and that's not all. I don't think your friend Faulke has sent any clones back."

"I can check," Jarvis said.

"I don't care what you do for your records. According to ours"—and there she was lying again—"he's been killing the clones that don't work out and putting them in composting crates. Those crates go to the Growing Pits, which grow fresh food for the city."

"He *what*?" Jarvis asked.

"And to make matters worse, he's using a hardening poison to kill them, a poison our coroner fears might leach into our food supply. We're checking on that now. Although it doesn't matter. The intent is what matters, and clearly your man Faulke has lost his mind."

Jarvis cursed. "You're not making this up."

It wasn't a question.

"I'm not making this up," she said. "I want him and his little android friend out of here within the hour, or I'm arresting him, and I'm putting him on trial. Public trial."

"Do you realize how many operations you'll ruin?"

"No," she said, "and I don't care. Get him out of my city. It's only a matter of time before your crazy little operative starts killing legal humans, not just cloned ones. And I don't want him doing it here."

Jarvis cursed again. "Can I get your help—"

"No," she said. "I don't want anyone at the police department involved with your little operation. And if you go to the chief, I'll tell her that you have thwarted my attempts to arrest a man who threatens the entire dome. Because, honestly, Ike *baby*, this is a courtesy contact. I don't have to do you any favors at all, especially considering what kind of person, if I can use that word, you installed in my city. Have you got that?"

"Yes, Andrea, I do," he said, looking serious.

Andrea. So he had heard her all those times. And he had ignored her, the bastard. She made note of that too.

"One hour," she said, and signed off.

Then she wiped her hands on her skirt. They were shaking just a little. Screw him, the weaselly little bastard. She'd send someone to that office now, to escort Jarvis's horrid operative out of Armstrong.

She wanted to make sure that asshole left quickly, and didn't double back. She wanted this problem out of her city, off her Moon, and as far from her notice as possible. And that, she knew, was the best she could do without upsetting the department's special relationship with the Alliance.

She hoped her best would be good enough.

Up the back stairs, into the narrow hallway that smelled faintly of dry plastic, Koos led the raid, his best team members behind him. They fanned out in the narrow hallway, the two women first, signaling that the hallway was clear. Koos and Hala, the only other man on this part of the team, skirted past them, and through the open door of Faulke's office.

It was much smaller than Koos expected. Faulke was only three meters from him. Faulke was scrawny, narrow-shouldered, the kind of man easily ignored on the street.

He reached behind his back—probably for a weapon—as Koos and Hala held their laser rifles on him.

"Don't even try," Koos said. "I have no compunction shooting you."

Faulke's eyes glazed for a half second—probably letting his android guard know he was in trouble—then an expression of panic flitted across his face before he managed to control it.

The other members of Koos's team had already disabled the guard.

"Who are you?" Faulke asked.

Koos ignored him, and spoke to his team. "I want him bound. And make sure you disable his links."

One of the women slipped in around Koos, and put light cuffs around Faulke's wrists and pasted a small rectangle of Silent-Seal over his mouth.

*You can't get away with this,* Faulke sent on public links. *You have no idea who I am—*

And then his links shut off.

Koos grinned. "You're Cade Faulke. You work for Earth Alliance Intelligence. You've been running clones that you embed into businesses. Am I missing anything?"

Faulke's eyes didn't change, but he swallowed hard.

"Let's get him out of here," Koos said.

They encircled him, in case the other tenants on the floor decided to see what all the fuss was about. But no one opened any doors. The neighborhood was too dicey for that. If anyone had an ounce of civic feeling, they would have gone out front to stop the fight that Koos had staged below.

And no one had.

He took Faulke's arm, surprised at how flabby it was. Hardly any muscles at all. No wonder the asshole had used poison. He wasn't strong enough to subdue any living creature on his own.

"You're going to love what we have planned for you," Koos said as he dragged Faulke down the stairs. "By the end of it all, you and I will be old friends."

This time Faulke gave him a startled look.

Koos grinned at him, and led him to the waiting car that would take them to the Port.

It would be a long time before anyone heard from Cade Faulke again.

If they ever did.

DeRicci hated days like today. She had lost a case because of stupid laws that had no bearing on what really happened. A woman had been murdered, and DeRicci couldn't solve the case. It would go to property, where it would get stuck in a pile of cases that no one cared about, because no one would be able to put a value on this particular clone. No owner would come forward. No one would care.

And if DeRicci hadn't seen this sort of thing a dozen times, she would have tried to solve it herself in her off time. She might still hound property, just to make sure the case didn't get buried. Maybe she'd even use Brodner's lies. She might tell property that whoever planted the clone had tried to poison the city. That might get some dumb property detective off his butt.

She, on the other hand, was already working on the one good thing to come out of this long day. She was compiling all the documents on every single thing that Rayvon Lake had screwed up in their short tenure as partners. Even she hadn't realized how much it was.

She would have a long list for Gumiela by the end of the day, and this time, Gumiela would pay attention.

Or DeRicci would threaten to take the clone case to the media. DeRicci had been appalled that human waste could get into the recycling system; she would wager that the population of Armstrong would too.

One threat like that, and Gumiela would have to fire Lake.

It wasn't justice. It wasn't anything resembling justice.

But after a few years in this job, DeRicci had learned only one thing:

Justice didn't exist in the Earth Alliance.

Not for humans, not for clones, not for anyone.

And somehow, she had to live with it.

She just hadn't quite figured out how.

Deshin arrived home, exhausted and more than a little unsettled. The house smelled of baby powder and coffee. He hadn't really checked to see how the rest of Gerda's day alone with Paavo had gone. He felt guilty about that.

He went through the modest living room to the baby's room. He and Gerda didn't flash their wealth around Armstrong, preferring to live quietly. But he had so much security in the home that he was still startled the clone had broken through it.

Gerda was sitting in a rocking chair near the window, Paavo in her arms. She put a finger to her lips, but it did no good.

His five-month-old son twisted, and looked at Deshin with such aware eyes that it humbled him. Deshin knew that this baby was twenty times smarter than he would ever be. It worried him, and it pleased him as well.

Paavo smiled and extended his pudgy arms. Deshin picked him up. The boy was heavier than he had been just a week before. He also needed a diaper change.

Deshin took him to the changing table and started, knowing just from the look on her face that Gerda was exhausted too.

"Long day?" he asked.

"Good day," she said. "We made the right decision."

"Yes," he said. "We did."

He had decided on the way home not to tell her everything. He would wait until the interrogation of Cade Faulke and the five clones was over. Koos had taken all six of them out of Armstrong in the same ship.

And the interrogations wouldn't even start until Koos got them out of Earth Alliance territory, days from now. Deshin had no idea what would happen to Faulke or the clones after that. Deshin was leaving that up to Koos. Koos no longer headed security for Deshin Enterprises in Armstrong, but he had served Deshin well today. He would handle some of the company's work outside the Alliance.

Not a perfect day's work, not even the day's work Deshin had expected, but a good one nonetheless. He probably had other leaks to plug in his organization, but at least he knew what they were now.

His baby raised a chubby fist at Deshin as if agreeing that action needed to be taken. Deshin bent over and blew bubbles on Paavo's tummy, something that always made Paavo giggle.

He giggled now, a sound so infectious that Deshin wondered how he had lived without it all his life. He would do everything he could to protect this baby, everything he could to take care of his family.

"He trusts you," Gerda said with a tiny bit of amazement in her voice.

Most people never trusted Deshin. Gerda did, but Gerda was special.

Deshin blew bubbles on Paavo's tummy again, and Paavo laughed.

His boy did trust him.

He picked up his newly diapered son and cradled him in his arms. Then he kissed Gerda.

The three of them, forever.

That was what he needed, and that was what he ensured today.

The detective could poke around his business all she wanted, but she would never know the one thing that calmed Deshin down.

Justice had been done.

His family was safe.

And that was all that mattered. ○

## Ad Astra Per Strahan

Jonathan Strahan began his editing career over twenty years ago in the pages of *Eidolon* magazine, an outstanding small press publication which, according to the esteemed *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, “perhaps more than any of the other [Aussie] magazines . . . gave Australian SF a voice.” Since those beginnings, he’s gone on to become arguably the premier anthologist currently working in the field, carrying on the noble banner raised earlier by Damon Knight and Terry Carr, among others. Any collection of original works under his byline can be assumed to consist of top-notch stories.

*Reach for Infinity* (Solaris, trade paperback, \$9.99, 340 pages, ISBN 978-1-78108-203-4) is the third in a loosely linked set that began with *Engineering Infinity* (2010) and continued in *Edge of Infinity* (2012). As one might guess, this trio has its sights set on hardcore SF, extrapolation-rich storytelling. Strahan explicates in his latest introduction: the first anthology concerned far-off interstellar futures; the second volume solarcentric futures; and this third collection charts the nearest-term scenarios, as humanity leaves Earth for the first time in larger fashion. Working backward down the chronology, then, in an intriguing fashion.

Greg Egan does not write enough stories to satisfy me or his many other fans, so finding a new one as the opening salvo here is a treat. “Break My Fall” concerns a convoy of non-engine-bearing colonist ships headed to Mars, employing an ingenious system of spinning asteroid waystations for power. A solar flare and a mechanical failure make for a Hal Clement-style tale that eschews Egan’s usual metaphysics in a pared-down yet enjoyable fashion. Next up,

Aliette de Bodard offers “The Dust Queen,” which also displays a colonized Mars. Here, an expert in neurological “rewiring,” Quynh Ha, faces the ethical challenge of satisfying her imperious client without depriving the world of that elderly woman’s talents.

Ian McDonald, in “The Fifth Dragon,” builds us a Moon society as dense and rich as anything from Heinlein or Kessel, and then follows the divergent fates of two women who are best friends despite major differences. I loved the touch of a special lunar “saint,” Dona Luna, “goddess of dust and radiation.” Back on Earth, in “Kheldyu,” Karl Schroeder turns carbon sequestration into a sprightly action-filled industrial sabotage romp, à la Bruce Sterling, as our hero thwarts a dastardly plot hatching in Siberia.

Pat Cadigan’s “Report Concerning the Presence of Seahorses on Mars” is rife with juicy neologisms and ways of thinking that truly convey the cultural drift that her residents of Phoenix City, aka Feenixity, have come to experience. And an allied kind of mental and physical adaptation occurs to the solar explorers in Karen Lord’s “Hiraeth: A Tragedy in Four Acts.” Resonances with the work of Samuel Delany and Cordwainer Smith are well earned.

Ellen Klages beautifully channels Ray Bradbury in the wistful yet powerful “Amicae Aeternum,” where two young friends find humanity’s outward urge driving them apart. Cast in the form of an official report complete with bibliography, “Trademark Bugs: A Legal History,” by Adam Roberts, deals with “designer germs” in a way that would have made Pohl & Kornbluth proud. Linda Nagata’s “Attitude” is a stimulating entry in the sub-genre of imaginary future sports. Nova-bright novelist Hannu Rajaniemi



ports over his ideational fecundity to “Invisible Planets,” a baedeker of exotic worlds that brings the work of Stanislaw Lem to mind, as well as that of the avowed inspiration, Italo Calvino.

An exceedingly elderly woman surrounds herself with adopted “artificial people” in Kathleen Ann Goonan’s “Wilder Still, the Stars,” and discovers new and important ways of thinking and being. My favorite story, Ken MacLeod’s “The Entire Immense Superstructure”: An Installation” charts the zany progress of a mad artist through the surreal labyrinth of the WikiThing. Alastair Reynolds brings us a Besterish psychotic robot with “In Babelsberg.” And to conclude, the amazing Peter Watts takes us sundiving with a young engineered girl named, appropriately enough, Sunday in “Hotshot.”

This wide-ranging collection entertainingly illustrates that our path off this planet will be strewn with wonders and weirdnesses galore.

### **The Only FB That Matters Isn’t Facebook**

Fedogan & Bremer was one of my favorite small presses a decade or so ago. Their books were gorgeous artifacts, but, more importantly, their lively contents, originals and reprints alike, represented the superb tastes of the creative forces behind the firm, Philip Rahman and Dennis Weiler. Unfortunately, F&B experienced some sad circumstances—including the untimely death of Mr. Rahman—that caused them to go on hiatus. But now, happily, F&B are back, and as exciting and vibrant as ever.

One of their new offerings is an original anthology helmed by horror savant S.T. Joshi: *Searchers After Horror* (hardcover, \$30.00, 352 pages, ISBN 978-1878252265). There’s not a mediocre story in the lot, plenty of shivers both subtle and socko. Moreover, a gorgeous cover by Richard Corben and interior illos by Rodger Gerberding add to the sepulchral luster.

Melanie Tem gives us the entropic frigid decline of a female hoarder in

“Iced In.” John Shirley fuses cyberpunk with Lovecraft in “At Home with Aza-thoth.” “The Girl Between the Slats” by Michael Aronovitz keeps on pulling the meta-narrative rug out from under the reader. While searching out the perfect filming location for a cheap horror flick, the protagonist of Richard Gavin’s “The Patter of Tiny Feet” encounters his subconscious anxieties in tangible forms.

Ramsey Campbell is never less than masterful, and his “At Lorn Hall” delivers creepy atmospherics in Lord Crowcross’s decaying manor house. “Blind Fish” by Caitlín Kiernan manages to be strict science fiction as well as eldritch maritime horror. W.H. Pugmire returns us to his Sesqua Valley territory in “An Element of Nightmare,” where a seeker after poetry meets an erotic end instead.

A retired couple at odds with each other in Gary Fry’s “The Reeds” discover larger horrors in a curious patch of vegetation. Steve Rasnic Tem brings his protagonist back to his unnatural bucolic Virginia roots in “Crawdaddies.” Jonathan Thomas probes a strange French community in “Three Dreams of Ys,” while Lois Gresh ventures into truly oddball Neal Barrett-style otherness with “Willie the Protector.”

The coup of this collection is a never-before-published piece by Hannes Bok, “Miranda’s Tree,” which is like a *Night Gallery* episode written by Shirley Jackson. An elderly widower reaches a kind of transcendence in “The Beautiful Fog Ascending” by Simon Strantzas. Nick Marmatas ably inhabits HPL’s stomping grounds of haunted Massachusetts in “Exit Through the Gift Shop.” “Going to Ground” by Darrell Schweitzer delivers justice to a murderer atop some eerie ridges. And Ann Schwader deftly explores the legacy of some haunted photographs in “Dark Equinox.”

Channeling Thomas Burnett Swann, Brian Stableford delivers an adventure amongst the dryads and fauns of classical Greece in “Et in Arcadia Ego.” The dread ecology of a polar island entraps a military mission in Jason Brock’s “The

Shadow of Heaven." A man and a woman are fascinated with skeletons and mummies to no good end in Nancy Kilpatrick's "Flesh and Bones." The Elder Gods manifest in the town of Sac Prairie in John Haefele's "The Sculptures in the House." And, paralleling Melanie Tem's opening story, Donald Tyson's "Ice Fishing" offers a wintry eruption of supernatural death.

Joshi's superior selections are both old school yet *au courant*, pointing toward a fine future for this immemorial genre.

### Life and Death After the Blink

I suspect that most hardcore readers and bibliophiles share a trait that I myself certainly exhibit. I will often start collecting the works of an author based on word of mouth or good reviews, even though I know full well that I won't get the immediate chance to read them. They accumulate, pages unturned, to my eternal shame, but provide some solace in their mere presence, a token of my good intentions and interest.

Thus, having harkened to some buzz about Robert Jackson Bennett, I picked up (or was sent for review) his first four books: *Mr. Shivers* (2010); *The Company Man* (2011); *The Troupe* (2012); and *American Elsewhere* (2013). As of this writing, there they still sit on my shelves, unread.

But when his newest arrived, *City of Stairs* (Broadway Books, trade paperback, \$15.00, 464 pages, ISBN 978-0804137171), I felt the time had come when I could wait no longer to sample this award-winning new writer. And what I discovered made me glad I had the earlier volumes readily to hand, so I could now enjoy them at my leisure. They were a confirmation of my good instincts.

*City of Stairs* is remarkably fresh and fun and well done, reminiscent of the work of Paul Park in *The Starbridge Chronicles* and Daniel Abraham in *The Long Price Quartet*. Bennett's fifth novel is a shining example of New Weird that proves that the youthful genre has legs beyond any immediate faddishness, when executed with ingenuity and skill.

First, let's talk about venue and history, then characters and plot.

There's an enormous, rich, well-conceived backstory to this book, which emerges in stages. This subcreation truly feels like a real world, tangible and complexly interlinked. Very briefly: one polity of our concern, the place where all the action occurs, is dubbed, simply, the Continent; the other relevant nation is named Saypur. For a long time, the Continent ruled Saypur and used its people as slaves, thanks to the powers of six living Divinities and the magical artifacts and creatures they provided. Then, thanks to one legendary hero, Saypur managed to conquer the Continent and kill all the gods. Doing so caused the Blink, during which much of the supernaturally raised infrastructure of the Continent disappeared, devolved, or transformed. Now the capital of the Continent, the city of Bulikov, is a poor shambles of its old self, ruled with an iron hand by Saypuri magistrates. Yet there are hints of Divine power still extant, and a terrorist group who want to restore the old glories.

Into this comes our heroine, Shara Thivani, and her assistant, the giant and scary ex-seaman Sigrud. Shara, whose real last name links her to the ancient conquering family, is a secret intelligence agent for Saypur, tasked with investigating the murder of a Saypuri scholar. What she cannot know is that her investigation will bring her back into contact with a Continental lover from her youth, as well as into conflict with assorted vast conspiracies and secrets that have the potential to undermine all existing balances.

Bennett tells a thrilling, formidable story that exhibits the perfect ratio of naturalism to the fantastic, of action to philosophy, of characterization to setting, of humor to tragedy. His dialogue is superb, and the revelations about Shara's past, Sigrud's past and the lifelines of all the other characters is doled out in artistic measure. You will never guess all the twists and turns of this tale, and you will feel immense and cathartic satisfaction at its conclusion.

The New Weird at its best allegorizes our actual planet, and there's surely some of that parallelism here, with the relationship of conquered Bulikov to conqueror Saypur tallying with any number of actual extant geopolitical situations. But Bennett has no axes to grind, and his storytelling mojo is given full rein, producing a genuine work of art.

### **The Girl, the Pewter-Colored Watch, and Everything**

I have always had a fondness for portal fantasies, and the worlds they lead to. Narnia, Oz, Amber . . . who wouldn't want to travel to such places and have great adventures, even if a modicum of danger abounded? Such tales speak to our innate existential dissatisfaction with mundane life, however much we relish hearth and family and friends. I'm reminded of the refrain to that old Steely Dan song which asserts that the grass is always greener in any universe next door. And if the cross-dimensional traveler discovers that he or she has an ancestral connection to the strange place, is a figure of some repute there—well, what could be better?

In her new novel, *A Child of the Hidden Sea* (Tor, hardcover, \$25.99, 332 pages, ISBN 978-0-7653-3449-7), A.M. Dellamonica taps into this rich gestalt of feelings and frissons and gives us a rewarding, involving example of the category. Hitting all the expected thematic milestones and tropes, yet with some few surprises along the route, the book does not quite reach masterpiece heights, but provides plenty of rousing adventures nonetheless.

Our protagonist is twenty-four-year-old Sophie Hansa. Adopted when very young, she now has tracked down her hidden birth-mother. Having introduced herself and been rebuffed, she next interacts briefly and alarmingly with a woman, Gale, who appears to be her aunt by blood. But Gale's crisis-provoked use of an odd pocketwatch lands Sophie and her aunt in an alternate world known as Stormwrack, a planet where some two

hundred fifty island nations exist in a complicated arrangement dubbed the Cessation.

It turns out that Sophie's aunt and mother—and a feisty and jealous younger half-sister named Verena—are all more or less native to Stormwrack, able to travel back and forth at will. After Sophie spends a week there, she's sent back to Earth with a longing and determination to revisit Stormwrack. And this time she will go fully prepared to make her mark, dragging along her foster brother Bram. But once returned to her native land, Sophie finds herself in a deadly web of murder, commercial rivalries, and realpolitik. As well as killer chimeras.

Dellamonica has a lot of fun pitting Earthly worldviews and attitudes against Stormwrackian ones. The cognitive dissonance exhibited by Sophie is testament to her ingenuity and depth of personality. Her passions—diving, natural history—find handy outlets. The magical systems of Stormwrack are cleverly designed and sharply limned. The interplay amongst all the cast is charming, including some romantic affiliations. And if Stormwrack resembles many another secondary milieu, and if Sophie's exploits are pretty much something Holger Danske or John Carter or Harold Shea might have also encountered, the telling of her tale is still authentic and sharp and enjoyable.

### **Depredations of the Silver Ripper**

When I reviewed Paul Cornell's *London Falling*, I identified it as sparky, prickly and well-wrought, a possible new franchise in the mode of *Hellblazer* and *Hellboy*: gritty occult investigations, to be shorthandedly and somewhat reductionistically precise. In good franchise fashion, the sequel, *The Severed Streets* (Tor, hardcover, \$26.99, 416 pages, ISBN 978-0765330284), delivers exactly what the first did, with a few new developments in character and milieu. No surprises, in other words, but plenty of quality payoffs in the foreseen promised mode.

Thanks to their previous investigation (nicely encapsulated in Chapter 1 in

reader-friendly fashion), a small group of London cops led by one James Quill have been granted the Sight, a kind of extrasensory perception of the supernatural (wittily compared by Cornell to the augmented reality of Google Glass). Their secret unit is now tasked with solving the occult crimes of London. And, some three months on from their previous maiden outing, they have a doozy of an assignment. A killer emulating Jack the Ripper is slaughtering important men in impossible situations, leaving behind a weird ectoplasmic substance as the only clue. Quill and company are soon plumbing the depths of weird pubs, looking for a scrying mirror, attending uncanny auctions, and even venturing down to Hell. Oh, and did I mention that one of their leads is an author named Neil Gaiman, who reveals that he too possesses the Sight? Quite a cameo role!

Cornell is a dab hand at conjuring up eerie and shiversome situations that

consort believably with our naturalistic world. His portrait of haunted London develops new angles and layers. There's plenty of action and Holmesian deduction to keep the reader interested and on the edge of his or her seat. But I do note that while the horrific villain in the first book, the witch Mora Losley, was in the faces of our heroes every minute, the Ripper here is rather distant and abstract, not much of a personality (because he's really a puppet for another bad guy, it eventuates), and the mad attacker with the razor and "silver goo" does not directly confront our cops till past the midpoint of the story. It makes for a bit less of a fraught tale.

Ultimately, though, the interplay amongst the cleanly delineated quirky cast offers nearly as much enjoyment and suspense as the supernatural MacGuffin, and that attraction will keep readers happily coming back for more. ○

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

**S**pring starts early on the convention circuit. I'll be at Boskone and LunaCon. Also good for Asimovians: CapriCon, ConDFW, RadCon, MystiCon, FogCon, All-Con, ConDor and MidSouthCon. Shake those winter blues. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of our con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

## FEBRUARY 2015

- 13–15—Boskone. For info, write: Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. Or phone: (617) 625-2311 (10 a.m. to 10 p.m., not collect). (Web) [www.boskone.org](http://www.boskone.org). (E-mail) [info@boskone.org](mailto:info@boskone.org). Con will be held in: Boston MA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Westin Waterfront. Guests will include: Steven Brust, artists Charles Lang and Wendy Snow-Lang, musicians Maya and Jeff Bohnhoff.
- 12–15—CapriCon. [www.capricon.org](http://www.capricon.org). Westin, Wheeling (Chicago) IL. Author Matt Forbeck, gamer Steve Jackson, musician A. J. Adams.
- 13–15—ConDFW. [www.condfw.org](http://www.condfw.org). Hilton Lincoln Centre, Dallas TX. C. Dean Andersson, Brad Foster, Paul Abell, J. D. Horn, Rocky Kelley.
- 13–15—RadCon. [www.radcon.org](http://www.radcon.org). Pasco WA. General SF/fantasy/horror con.
- 13–15—Farpoint. [www.farpointcon.com](http://www.farpointcon.com). Baltimore North Plaza, Timonium MD. Tim Russ, Mark Okrand. *Star Trek* and other SF media.
- 13–15—KatsuCon. [www.katsucon.org](http://www.katsucon.org). Gaylord Hotel, National Harbor MD (south of Washington DC). Yaya Han, Matt Mercer, Josh Grelle.
- 14–15—PicoCon. [www.icsf.org.uk](http://www.icsf.org.uk). Beit Quad, Imperial College, London UK. Cory Doctorow, others.
- 20–22—VisionCon. [www.visioncon.net](http://www.visioncon.net). Radisson, Branson MO. Alaina Huffman, Gerry Kissell, Justin Achilli, S. Strait. Anime, gaming, SF.
- 20–22—ConCave. [www.concaveky.org](http://www.concaveky.org). Bowling Green KY. SF, fantasy and horror relaxa-con.
- 20–22—Furry Fiesta. [www.furryfiesta.org](http://www.furryfiesta.org). InterContinental Hotel, Dallas TX. Dingbat, J. D. Puppy, Sanguine Games. Anthropomorphics.
- 20–22—Redemption. [www.smof.com/redemption](http://www.smof.com/redemption). Britannia Hotel, Coventry UK. Miltos Yerolemov. Multimedia convention.
- 27–Mar. 1—MystiCon. [www.mysticon-va.com](http://www.mysticon-va.com). Holiday Inn Tanglewood, Roanoke VA. A. D. Foster, Sean Maher, Scott Rorie, C. Stiles.
- 27–Mar. 1—AnachroCon. [www.anachrocon.com](http://www.anachrocon.com). Marriott Century Center, Atlanta GA. Lee Martindale. Steampunk, classic SF literature.
- 27–Mar. 1—ConNooga. [www.connooga.com](http://www.connooga.com). Chattanooga TN. SF, horror, fantasy, multigenre.
- 27–Mar. 1—Ring of Fire Con. [www.rofcon.com](http://www.rofcon.com). Holiday Inn Virginia Beach Norfolk, Virginia Beach VA. Jon St. John. Anime, cosplay.
- 27–Mar. 1—KamiCon. [www.kamicon.net](http://www.kamicon.net). Birmingham AL. Anime.

## MARCH 2015

- 5–8—VancouFur. [www.vancoufur.ca](http://www.vancoufur.ca). Vancouver BC. Theme: "Gangsters and Gumshoes." Anthropomorphics/furries.
- 6–8—FogCon, Box 3764, Hayward CA 94540. [www.fogcon.org](http://www.fogcon.org). Walnut Creek (San Francisco) CA. K. S. Robinson. Literary SF & fantasy.
- 6–8—MarsCon, Box 21213, Eagan MN 55121. [www.marscon.org](http://www.marscon.org). Bloomington (Minneapolis) MN. Theme: "Heroes & Wizards." Relaxacon.
- 12–15—All-Con, Box 177194, Irving TX 75019. [www.all-con.net](http://www.all-con.net). Addison (Dallas) TX. General SF/fantasy/horror convention.
- 13–15—ConDor, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175. [www.condorcon.org](http://www.condorcon.org). San Diego CA. General SF/fantasy/horror convention.
- 13–15—OperaCon. [www.tinyurl.com/operacon](http://www.tinyurl.com/operacon). Milwaukee WI. Premiere of an opera by old-time *Asimov's* author Somtow Sucharitkul.
- 18–22—Int'l. Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts. [www.ifa.org](http://www.ifa.org). Airport Marriott, Orlando FL. Slonczewski. Academic conference.
- 20–22—LunaCon, Box 451, Suffern NY 10901. [www.lunacon.org](http://www.lunacon.org). Rye Brook (near New York City) NY. General SF/fantasy/horror con.
- 20–22—MidSouthCon, Box 17724, Memphis TN 38187. [www.midsouthcon.org](http://www.midsouthcon.org). Memphis TN. Cory Doctorow. General SF/fantasy/horror con.
- 20–22—CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 38533. [www.coastcon.org](http://www.coastcon.org). Gulf Coast Coliseum and Convention Center, Biloxi MS.
- 21—ImagiCon. [www.imagicon.nl](http://www.imagicon.nl). Reehorst, Netherlands. SF, comics, horror, fantasy.
- 27–29—ConBust. <http://sophia.smith.edu/conbust>. Smith College, Northampton MA. Focus on female members of the participating community.
- 28–29—Conference on Middle Earth. [www.3rdcome.org](http://www.3rdcome.org). Western Mass. *The Lord of the Rings*, and other works of J. R. R. Tolkien.
- 27–29—Corflu. [corflu3@gmail.com](mailto:corflu3@gmail.com). Newcastle upon Tyne UK. Fanzines.

## AUGUST 2015

- 19–23—Sasquan, PMB 208, 15127 Main St. E., Suite 104, Sumner WA 98390. [www.sasquan.org](http://www.sasquan.org). Spokane WA. Gerrold. WorldCon. \$190.

## AUGUST 2016

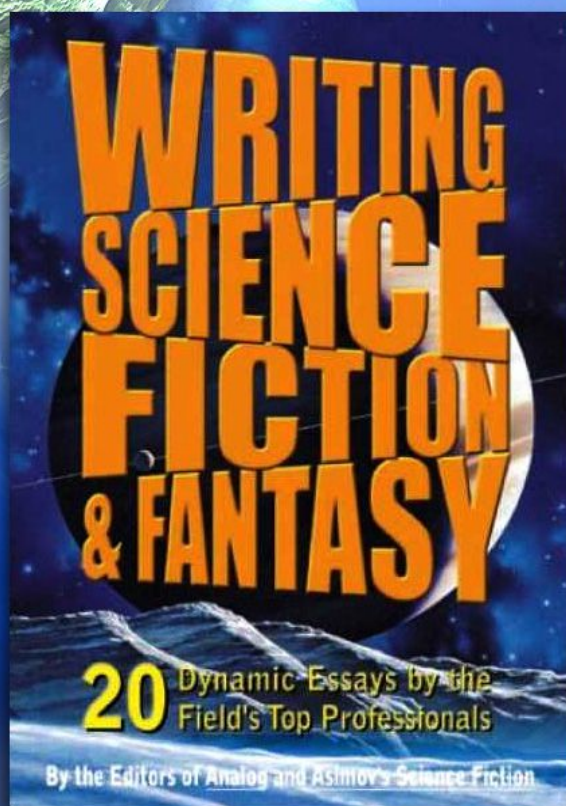
- 17–21—MidAmeriCon II. [www.midamericon2.org](http://www.midamericon2.org). Convention Center and Bartle Hall, Kansas City MO. Kinuko Y. Craft. WorldCon. \$150.

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